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THE BATTLE OF PLASSEY AND THE CONQUEST OF BENGAL

THE BATTLE OF PLASSEY

AND THE CONQUEST OF BENGAL

Michael Edwardes

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PREFACE

THE BATTLE OF PLASSEY has a sure place in the history of both Britain and India. To the British it appears as the victory which first set them upon the road that ended with the conquest of the whole of India. To the Indians it has been a symbol of their defeat and subsequent exploitation by foreign rulers. The Indian mutineers of 1857 were encouraged by a prophecy that the centenary of the battle of Plassey would see the end of British power in India; it was, in fact, almost another century after that before, in 1947, the prophecy was fulfilled.

In the past, historians have often collected together those battles which they have believed to be decisive—engagements, that is, which have quite literally changed the course of history. Plassey has seldom found a place among them. It may well have been excluded because of the tiny numbers involved, because, although the Nawab of Bengal had an army of some 50,000 to oppose the British commander's 3,000, the number of Nawab's troops who actually fought was very small. Treason and conspiracy had been more successful than bullets. The casualties, too, were tiny. It is sometimes the habit of military historians to judge the importance of a battle by the returns of killed and wounded. By these standards, Plassey was hardly a battle at all. But, in the final analysis, the index of importance of any military engagement lies in its results. The consequences of Plassey were enormous.

There are, however, other criteria which the historian must apply. There are the questions of strategy and tactics—subjects that can be argued over indefinitely—and the indefinable but essential qualities of courage and sacrifice. The British commander at Plassey, Robert Clive, was a brilliant tactician, with that aggressive caution which is the hallmark of a great military leader. But he was also something more than a soldier, for it must be remembered that he started life as a clerk in the service of the East India Company in Madras. He was, above all, the Company's servant, whose aim was to push forward the affairs of his masters by whatever methods were the best. In this, Clive was just as much diplomat as soldier. His manner

of fighting was a combination of conspiracy and attack. With the immense forces ranged against him, this was the only strategy that had any chance of success.

The derision with which historians of India—and I am not without guilt myself—have treated Plassey is due in the main to a tendency to regard the battle as a thing in itself, an engagement without antecedents. I do not believe that Plassey can be treated in this way. It must be seen, in the way I have attempted to see it in this book, as the final incident in a longer battle that began with the Nawab's capture of Kasimbazar and sack of Calcutta. Then Plassey comes into perspective—and its importance is abundantly clear. The recapture of Calcutta by the British, the defeat of the French at Chandernagore, were preliminaries that made Plassey possible, just as the intrigues and conspiracies which filled the intervening time ensured Clive's success. Plassey was the final stage in the conquest of Bengal, for afterwards behind the figure of the puppet Nawab, there was no doubt who were the real rulers. Seven years later at the battle of Buxar—far bloodier and more bitterly contested than Plassey—the British defeated the Mughal emperor and his prime minister. Buxar was the first battle in the conquest of India, but without Plassey it would not have taken place.

My method in this book has been to fill in as much of the background to British affairs in Bengal as is necessary to understand the nature of the campaign. I have gone into some detail over the intrigues with the Nawab's officers and others, for they were part of the strategy of war; Mr Watts at Murshidabad was just as much in the front line as Clive and his sepoys. The extensive quotations are all from contemporary sources, all from men who were themselves involved in the events or near enough to them to see most of the game. Such sources are reasonably plentiful on the British side but meagre on that of their antagonists. The reader will find a short bibliography at the end of the book.

Aden, November 1961

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Medal commemorating the
Battle of Plassey

Struck by Thomas Pingo in 1758

Prelude

THE BRITISH
IN
BENGAL

I

The Founding of Calcuttta

THE ENGLISH first arrived in Bengal as traders in 1633. In the beginning, their trading establishments were modest; there was one at Balasore at the mouth of the estuary of the river Hugli, then another at Hugli itself, the principal port of the province. By 1660 they had founded a trading station at Kasimbazar, near Murshidabad, as well as one further north at Patna, a town famous for silk, saltpetre, and opium.

In 1658, a certain Job Charnock was appointed First Member of Council at Kasimbazar at a salary of twenty pounds a year. Local officials, anxious to make a profit out of the foreigners, tried to put the squeeze upon him but Charnock stoutly resisted. When, in 1685 after many disappointments, he was promoted Chief at Hugli, it was many months before he was able to slip out of Kasimbazar through a cordon of soldiers which the officials sent to prevent him from leaving.

Charnock's employers, the English East India Company, had already come to the conclusion that, if trade depended on the whims —and the continuous corruption—of native officials, it was not profitable trade. They had, however, no intention of giving up the possibilities of wealth that Bengal seemed to offer. On the contrary. Their agents must therefore fortify the Company's settlements, and train and discipline soldiers for their defence. But not only for that. The directors in London had wider dreams: 'Our Captains tell us there is noe way to mend our condition but by seizing and fortifying one of those pleasant Islands in the Ganges about the Braces.' Unfortunately, they also received other advice—to mount an expedition against the port of Chittagong on the Bay of Bengal—and accepted it. 'But you must always understand', they wrote in terms not unfamiliar to our modern ears, 'that tho' we are prepared for,

and resolved to enter into a war with ye Mogull (being necessitated thereunto), our ultimate end is peace, for as we have never done it, soe our natures are averse to bloodshed and Rapine, which usually attend the most just warrs, but we have no remedy left, but either to desert our Trade, or we must draw the Sword his Majesty has intrusted us with to vindicate the Rights and Honour of the English nation in India.' With sublime arrogance, ten ships, and 600 men, the British flung down the gauntlet at the feet of the still powerful Mughal empire!

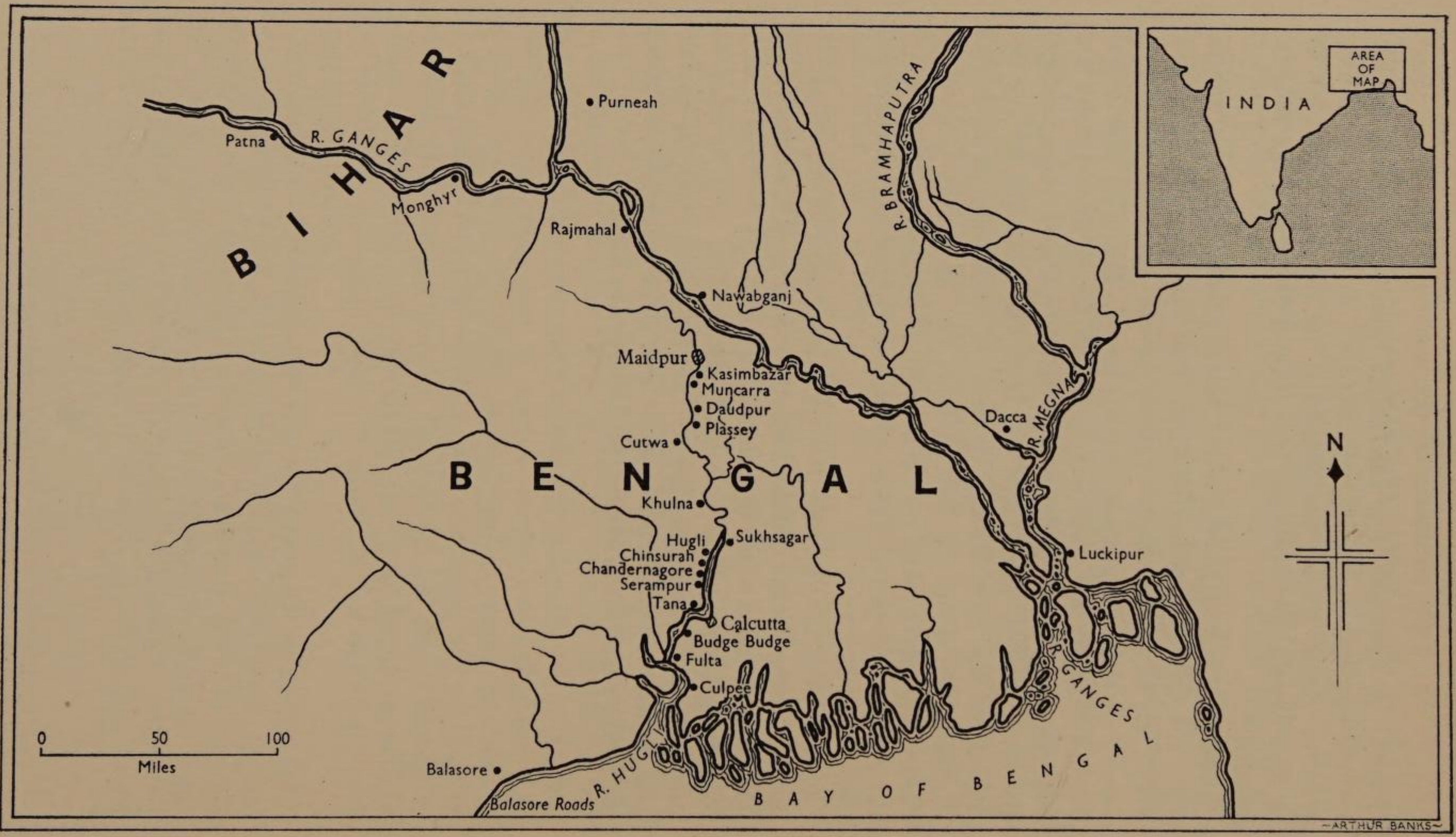
The reply of the Mughal viceroy of Bengal to a threatening letter from the English was to order all English trading posts—or 'factories', as they were called—to be seized, the inmates to be imprisoned, and a large force to be despatched against Hugli. Charnock prudently withdrew to a spot near the sea where his ships might be of some use to him. The spot to which he withdrew was the village of Chuttanuttee which, with the adjoining villages of Kalchata and Gobindpur, was to become the site of Calcutta. Charnock now asked the Mughal governor for permission to build a settlement there, but the governor sent an army instead, and Charnock once again withdrew, this time to Hijili, a low, flat island some seventy miles down river. After a siege and a gallant defence had produced what can only be described as stalemate, the two parties signed a treaty and Charnock hoped he might now return to Chuttanuttee. But this was not to be, for, in September 1688, a ship arrived whose captain had specific instructions 'that in any case our servants in the Bay [of Bengal] have not already fortified themselves in some considerable place', they were 'to prepare to come on board our ship in three days' time'. The destination of ship and passengers was to be Chittagong. Charnock's protests were overruled, and the English withdrew from Bengal, burning Balasore on the way. Chittagong turned out to be too well defended for this little British expedition and the force, including Charnock, sailed off for the Company's settlement at Madras.

It was not until January 1690 that the possibility presented itself of a return to Bengal. In that month, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb decided that there was profit to be made from trade with the English and a peace was concluded which would permit the English to go back to Bengal. On 18 February, the president (the senior merchant) of Fort St George, Madras, wrote to the directors of the East India

Company in London: 'For confidence thereof [of peace] we are resolved to send doune Agent Charnock to Bengall to the Bay upon the which we are encouraged to by the kind invitation of the now worthy good Nabob [the Nawab of Bengal, the Mughal governor].'

Charnock once again arrived at Chuttanuttee on Sunday 4 August 1690. The sight he saw from his little ship was scarcely an inspiring one. A few huts on a stretch of rising ground were surrounded by a malarial swamp and a dense jungle beyond. The rainy season was also in full swing and there was no shelter, for all the buildings had been destroyed. But slowly the new settlement took shape, though Charnock died in 1693 worn out with his exertions. By the beginning of the new century, a series of walls and bastions had produced the citadel of Fort William on the site of Gobindpur village, and surrounding it—on the sites of the other two villages—had grown a prosperous town with a large population of native and foreign traders.

Calcutta was not the only European settlement of importance in Bengal, for the French had established themselves at Chandernagore, some twenty miles north of Calcutta, in 1673, and the Dutch had a flourishing settlement at Chinsurah. Both were well fortified, at least to native eyes. Soon, rivalry between them—and the nations they represented—in Bengal was to lead to the battlefield of Plassey and to the establishment of British dominion in India.


BIHAR
R. GANGES
Patna
Monghyr
Purneah
Rajmahal
R. BRAMHAPUTRA
AREA OF MAP
INDIA
Nawabganj
Maidpur
Kasimbazar
Muncarra
Daudpur
Plassey
Cutwa
Dacca
R. MEGNA
BENGAL
Khulna
Hugli
Sukhsagar
Chinsurah
Chandernagore
Serampur
Tana
Calcutta
Budge Budge
Fulta
Culpee
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Miles
Balasore
Balasore Roads
R. HUGLI
R. GANGES
BAY OF BENGAL
ARTHUR BANKS

2

The Kingdom of Bengal

CHANGES were also taking place in the native government of Bengal itself. In 1701, a Hindu convert to Islam, Murshid Kuli Khan, was sent to Bengal as the Mughal emperor's financial representative. He soon quarrelled with the governor and took himself off from the capital at Dacca to the town of Muksabad which, in 1704, he renamed Murshidabad in his own honour. In 1706, he extorted money out of the British in exchange for permission to establish a factory at Kasimbazar and, by 1713, his demands were growing so onerous that the British sent an embassy to Delhi to ask for the emperor's protection against him. This they received in the form of a *firman*, or patent, in 1717. Though Murshid Kuli Khan—who, since 1713, had been governor of the province—chose to interpret the patent in his own terms, the British now possessed considerable advantages over their European rivals.

Murshid Kuli Khan died in 1725 and was succeeded by his son-in-law, Shuja Khan. Among the favourites of the new Nawab were two brothers, Ahmad and Alivardi Khan. Soon they came to hold his complete confidence and, in 1729, Alivardi was made governor of Patna. In the same year, a son was born to Alivardi's favourite nephew, Zain-ud-din. The boy was named Mirza Muhammad, but he is known to history as Siraj-ud-daula.

It seems that the two brothers must have come to some arrangement with the great Hindu bankers, the Seths—who had, in 1713, been made bankers to the emperor—for Alivardi was given the rank and title of Nawab of Patna in 1736 through the Seths' influence with Delhi. Three years later, Shuja Khan died after a reign notable for peace and good government, leaving the succession to his son, Sarfaraz Khan. The new Nawab of Bengal—who, according to a contemporary, 'indulged in excessive debauchery,

even to that degree as to disorder his faculties, soon rendered himself odious to his people, and lost the affections of those who might have supported him'—did not notice the growing pretensions of his dead father's favourites. Sarfaraz antagonised the Seths (though the reason for their quarrel is not clear) but so too did Ahmad, who had remained at the court of Murshidabad, and whom the Seths now persuaded Sarfaraz to dismiss. When Alivardi Khan heard this news, he marched upon Murshidabad—protesting loyalty to Sarfaraz, but demanding action against his brother's enemies. Deceived by the protestations of loyalty, Sarfaraz left it too late before raising an army, and he was defeated by Alivardi at Gheria in April 1740. The first ten years of Alivardi's reign were devoted to fighting the Marathas, a warrior race from central India who, in the decline of the Mughal empire, had seen the opportunity to seize control.

In 1741, with the approval of their puppet, the Mughal emperor, the Marathas attacked Bengal; but the protracted fighting exhausted both sides and, in 1751, a compromise was arrived at by which Alivardi Khan ceded Orissa to the Marathas and agreed to make an annual payment. Thereafter, Alivardi's reign was peaceful although he was frequently urged by his ministers to attack the British—who appeared to be growing stronger every year.

Alivardi's conduct towards the Europeans in Bengal was strict. During his wars with the Marathas he had encouraged the Europeans to extend their fortifications and, in 1744, the English had begun to dig a moat round the northern half of Calcutta, which came to be known as the Maratha Ditch. At the same time, however, he had compelled the Europeans to contribute to the expense of the wars. When the English had asked for permission to increase their fortifications at Calcutta, he replied: 'You are merchants, what need have you of a fortress? Being under my protection, you have no enemies to fear.'

Alivardi kept himself well informed on what was going on in south India, where the British and French were making use of native princes in their manœuvres for power. He was determined to prevent a repetition of these tactics in Bengal, though he had no wish to deprive himself of the profits that the Europeans brought through trade and commerce. He was, in fact, reported to have compared 'the Europeans to a hive of bees, of whose honey you might reap the benefit, but that if you disturbed their hive they

would sting you to death'. But his very profound appreciation of the growing strength of the Europeans was shown in reply to his nephew, who supported the views of the general, Mustafa Khan, in believing that it would be an easy matter to despoil the Europeans of their riches:

> My child, Mustafa Khan is a soldier, and wishes us to be constantly in need of his services, but how come you to join in his request? What have the English done against me that I should use them ill? It is not difficult to extinguish fire on land; but should the sea be in flames, who can put them out? Never listen to such advice as his for the result would probably be fatal.

Alivardi's caution did not mean that he was unwilling to show the European who was master. When, in 1749, the English Commodore Griffin seized the goods of an Armenian merchant who promptly appealed to the Nawab for aid, Alivardi sent soldiers to the British factories and prevented them from trading for six months until they accepted his terms for a settlement. The English, secure as they thought themselves to be in the protection of the Mughal emperor's *firman*—which, amongst other privileges, included exemption from customs duties—were constantly complaining that their rights were being infringed by the Nawab. The Nawab maintained that the British had all the liberties he cared to grant in the interests of the state, and that they were in any case abusing their privileges in the most flagrant manner and to the advantage of the Nawab's enemies. Certainly, the Nawab was right. The English behaved with arrogance and misused their rights in the interests of profit and intrigue. One contemporary, Captain Rennie, stated the case precisely when he wrote in 1756:

> The injustice to the Moors [the natives] consists in that, being by their courtesy permitted to live here as merchants, to protect and judge what natives were their servants, and to trade custom free—we under that pretence protected all the Nabob's [Nawab's] subjects that claimed our protection, though they were neither our servants nor our merchants, and gave our *dustucks* or passes to numbers of natives to trade custom free, to the great prejudice of the Nabob's revenue; nay more, we levied large duties upon goods brought into our districts from the very people that permitted us to trade custom free, and by numbers of impositions (framed to raise the Company's revenues, some of which were ruinous to ourselves)—

> such as taxes on marriages, provisions transferring land property, &c—caused eternal clamour and complaints against us at Court.

The English, on their part, irritated at what they thought to be petty restrictions of their privileges, were not above considering war with the Nawab as a means of salving their pride and increasing their profits. One of them, Robert Orme, wrote to Robert Clive in 1752:

> The Nabob coming down with all His Excellency's cannon to Hughley and with an interest to bully all the Settlements out of a large sum of money; Clive, 'twould be a good deed to swinge the old dog. I don't speak at random when I say that the Company must think seriously of it, or twill not be worth their while to trade in Bengal.

Before the attempt to 'swinge the old dog' could be made, Alivardi Khan died of dropsy on 10 April 1756, at the age of eighty-two. His character was described by that same Robert Orme as 'sufficiently delineated by his actions; his private life was very different from the usual manners of a Mahometan prince in Indostan; for he was always extremely temperate, had no pleasures, kept no Seraglio, and always lived the husband of one wife.' His successor was to be of a very different mould.

During the latter part of his reign, Alivardi Khan's favourite at court had been his grand-nephew, Mirza Muhammad. Despite the fact that Mirza, impatient for Alivardi's death and his own accession to the throne, had even broken into rebellion in 1750, Alivardi adopted him three years before his death as son and heir. It was upon this occasion that Mirza received the name of Siraj-ud-daula, 'the lamp of the state'. Siraj-ud-daula's temperament and reputation were not such as to inspire confidence in the future. An Englishman described him as 'a young man, violent, passionate, of great ambition tinctured with avarice', but it is on one of his own relatives, the historian Ghulam Husain Khan, whom we rely for much of the information that is available about him. Ghulam gives us the most telling picture of the heir to the throne of Bengal:

> . . . making no distinction between vice and virtue, and paying no regard to the nearest relations, he carried defilement wherever he went, and, like a man alienated in his mind, he made the houses of men and women of distinction the scenes of his profligacy, without minding either rank or station. In a little time he became as detested

as Pharao, and people on meeting him by chance used to say, 'God save us from him'.

Alivardi was certainly not blind to the faults of Siraj-ud-daula, for the same source reports that he said, in the presence of the court, 'that as soon as he himself was dead, and Siraj-ud-daula should succeed him, the *Hatmen* [the Europeans] would possess themselves of all the shores of India'. The only precaution Alivardi chose to take was to make his adopted son swear upon the Koran that he would abstain from alcohol. This promise Siraj-ud-daula rigidly kept but, according to contemporaries, it was already too late—his mind was already affected by acute alcoholism.

Siraj-ud-daula had not been the only possible heir—there were in fact others with greater claims—but a long series of deaths both natural and contrived had left only two others who might dispute Siraj-ud-daula's succession. These were his cousin, Shaukat Jang, and an infant, Murad-ud-daula. Alivardi Khan had therefore taken precautions to ensure that his favourite's right to the throne would not be challenged; his method was to ensure that Siraj-ud-daula should be surrounded with powerful supporters. The strongest of these were the court bankers, the Seths; Mir Jafar, the commander-in-chief, who was married to Alivardi's half-sister; and the minister, Rai Durlabh, a Hindu. Rai Durlabh was bought with costly presents, but Mir Jafar—a man of considerable attainments, proved in battle and with a reputation for honesty and loyalty—simply swore on the Koran. Alivardi's attempts to reconcile Siraj-ud-daula with his aunt, Ghasita Begum, who had adopted one of the potential rivals, Murad-ud-daula, had all failed. Nevertheless, by the time he died, he had done all he could to ensure that Siraj-ud-daula should succeed him.

3

The European Presence

By 1756, the principal foreign settlements in Bengal were those of the English, French, and Dutch. The Danes had a new but unimportant establishment at Serampore, the Portuguese had no actual settlement but only a number of traders.

The European enclaves were all laid out in a fairly similar manner —there was a native area, called Black Town, and a European one called (fairly obviously) White Town. The trading centre, known as the factory, was located in the White Town and surrounded by a wall with breaches to take guns. The fortified area, if such a grandiloquent description can be given to such feeble defences, was called a fort. Outside, there were no fortifications except in the case of the old moat at Chandernagore (the French settlement) and the Maratha Ditch round the northern part of Calcutta. This ditch, built in 1743–44 in defence against the Marathas, had originally been intended to circle the town and would have made it easily defensible by any reasonably well-led force. The threat from the Marathas, however, had passed and work was abandoned; even the completed part had been allowed to fill up with mud. The fort itself was surrounded by houses which were actually higher than its walls, and it was in fact quite indefensible. The Europeans lived with great ostentation in palatial houses surrounded by gardens, their luxury an open invitation to possible attack. The wealth of the European was there for all to see, the plunder displayed before all who wished to look—and covet.

The English, French, and Dutch also had factories at Kasimbazar, at Dacca, Balasore, and at Jagden or Luckipore at the mouth of the Ganges; the English had recently abandoned one at Patna, but the French and Dutch remained there. Only the English had fortified their factory at Kasimbazar. Elsewhere, the houses had no defences.

At Dacca, the factory was described as 'little better than a common house, surrounded with a thin brick wall, one half of it not above nine foot high'. The English were defended by no more than fifty Europeans, the French had even fewer, while the Dutch employed natives to protect them. Consequently, the up-country settlements lay at the mercy of the local governor and were frequently blockaded in order to squeeze bribes out of them.

The forts guarding the three main English, French, and Dutch settlements had never been put to the test by attack. They were quite wrongly assumed to be safe against anything a native army could do against them. The Europeans were very dimly informed about the state of each other's defences, each fort being believed by the other two to be well constructed and well manned. This was certainly not the case. The Dutch were the weakest, having only four military officers in the whole of their Bengal establishment. The French were rather better provided. According to a parade-sheet of January 1746, the European garrison at Chandernagore numbered a total of 112. If civilians are counted as being able in case of crisis to use firearms, the number can be increased to 376, but the fort the French intended to use as the centre of their defence was quite indefensible. The French were also virtually without funds and the French East India Company was heavily in debt to native merchants and bankers; because there was very little money for trade, there was even less to spend on fortifications. When the crisis came, and the French and English quarrelled between themselves, the French even used their poverty as a weapon in their defence—believing that the Nawab would help them against the British if only to protect the investments of native creditors! The French were, however, fortunate in being on very good terms with native officials; one Jean Law, who was in charge at Kasimbazar, even became a favourite with Siraj-ud-daula.

Of the British at Calcutta, we have the contemporary description of Robert Orme:

> The river Ganges forms a crescent between two points, the one called Perrin's Garden, the other Surman's Garden. The distance between these, measuring along the bank of the river, is about three miles and a half. In the deepest part of this crescent, about the middle between the two points, is situated Fort William, a building which many an old house in this country exceeds in its defences. It is situated a few

paces from the riverside, on the banks of which runs a Line of guns the whole length of the Fort from north to south, and this is the only formidable part, as it is capable of annoying ships in the river. The ends of this line are joined to the two bastions of the Fort nearest the river by a garden wall and a gate in each, which would resist one shot of a six-pounder, but which would be forced by the second. Opposite to the two bastions mentioned are two others inland to the eastward, but within thirty yards to the north and forty yards to the south the bastions are commanded by large houses. To the eastward inland the top of the Church commands the whole of both the northern and eastern ramparts. Northward and southward for the length of a mile, and to the eastward about a quarter of a mile, stand all the English houses, mostly separated from each other by large enclosures. Where the English habitations end to the northward commence those of the principal black merchants, which reach quite up to Perrin's Garden. To the southward down to Surman's Garden the houses, belonging to a lower class of the natives, are less conspicuous. Twelve years ago a ditch had been dug, beginning at Perrin's, and carried inland of the town in a crescent, with an intent to end at Surman's, but only four miles of it are finished.

The state of the defences was even worse than Orme reported, for the eastern and southern faces of the fort had been pierced with holes and doors, and a large warehouse had been built in a way which prevented such guns as there were from being used to give a flanking fire. As for the garrison, which should have numbered 500 men—in February 1756, the number given is only 260 European officers and men. When the attack finally came, the numbers were even smaller, having been reduced to 180, of whom only forty-five were Europeans. Altogether, with civilians, the English could muster the miserable total of 515. The reasons for this undermanning of the establishment at Fort William were the high death rate and the demands made by the Madras army for reinforcements during its war with the French there.

The small force at Calcutta lay under a yet more serious disadvantage than that of its minuscule size. Its commander, Captain Minchin, was totally incompetent. The magistrate of Calcutta, John Zephaniah Holwell, who was to play such an heroic role in the defence of the city, wrote:

> Touching the military capacity of our Commandant, I am a stranger. I can only say we are unhappy in his keeping it to himself, if he had any; as neither I, nor I believe anyone else, was witness to any part

> of his conduct that spoke or bore the appearance of his being the commanding military officer in the garrison.

Unfortunately, Captain Minchin was not the only incompetent in a position of authority. The governor, Roger Drake—who had held the appointment since 1752—was also a weak and indecisive character. Further, although he was only thirty-four his appointment was due to seniority and had not yet been confirmed by the Court of Directors in London; his authority was therefore often flouted by the other merchants in a manner which, as one of them put it, 'made him also appear cheap among the natives'. Apparently, too, when his wife died he married her sister, which, as the same writer said, could 'never be forgiven him, for the crime was not only itself bad but after that every man of character and sense shunned and avoided him, and was the means of his running after and keeping very indifferent company, and of committing a thousand little mean-nesses and low actions, farr unbecoming any man much more a Governour'. Calcutta was, in effect, administered by two members of Council, Manningham and Frankland (who were only interested in making their own fortunes) and by Holwell, the magistrate. Holwell was disliked by the Europeans because of his knowledge of and sympathy for the natives.

Relations between the Europeans and the Nawab were usually in the hands of intermediaries. Two of these are important in the context of the clash which was to come between the Nawab and the British. One, Coja Wajid, was an Armenian who lived at Hugli and was employed by the Nawab in negotiations with the French and Dutch. Though originally pro-French, the plunder of his property persuaded him to go over to the British side, and it was through him that the merchants of Calcutta learned of the Nawab's negotiations with the French. The other was Omichand, a Jain merchant who had been a favourite of Alivardi Khan but who had also, for years, acted as an agent for the British. He had, however, been deprived of this lucrative position by the intrigues of some of the merchants and was determined now to get his revenge.

This, then, was the position of the Europeans in Bengal on the death of Alivardi Khan. Arrogant and pushing, they were without the strength to defend themselves and had been foolish enough to make bitter enemies who, as we shall see, were like the Trojan horse —inside their own meagre citadels.

4

The Growth of Hostility

THE BRITISH had already fatally antagonised Siraj-ud-daula, even before the death of Alivardi Khan. More than one explanation has been given of the origin of the offence, but the facts are reasonably clear. Siraj-ud-daula suspected that the English were intriguing with Ghasita Begum, the adoptive mother of Murad-ud-daula, one of his rivals to the throne, and his suspicions were confirmed by the friendly reception given to Krishna Das, the son of the Begum's Hindu lover, when—on the pretext of making a pilgrimage to a sacred shrine at Orissa—he betook himself to Calcutta with his family and a large quantity of treasure. In Calcutta, he made his residence at the house of Omichand. These events were reported by the Nawab's spies; and the spies also alleged that the British were conspiring with the other contender for the throne, Shaukat Jang, too.

To add to these reports, the news also came that the British were extending the fortifications of Calcutta. This was true enough, though the works were trifling in extent and had in fact been put in hand because of the rumour that war between France and England was imminent. The French, however, assured Alivardi Khan that the British intended to attack him rather than them. Although Alivardi did not believe this, Siraj-ud-daula—already prejudiced against the British, and suspecting them of intrigue against him—was fully prepared to accept the allegations at their face value. At this time, however, other and more concrete menaces threatened Siraj-ud-daula. Not only was Alivardi Khan dying, but news was received that the minister of the Mughal emperor was advancing with a large army to claim the money which had been promised as tribute by Alivardi in 1750 but which had never been paid. Siraj-ud-daula was forced to content himself with ordering his spies to keep a close watch on the activities of the British in Calcutta. Mr Watts,

the Chief at Kasimbazar, heard of these orders and informed Governor Drake, recommending that Krishna Das be sent away from Calcutta as quickly as possible. Drake refused to accede to this suggestion—thus, of course, bringing on himself accusations of taking bribes from Krishna Das. His decision seems, however, to have been motivated more by a desire to ignore advice than by any actual corruption.

While Drake was getting his own back on those who had earlier flouted his decisions, who had ostracised him for his 'immoral conduct', Alivardi Khan died and Siraj-ud-daula acted rapidly to secure his succession. His first move was against his aunt, Ghasita Begum who, with a large fortune in jewellery and plate, had retired into the moated palace of the Moti Jhil. This palace, which was almost completely surrounded by water, was comparatively easy to defend. Among the Begum's companions were her lover, Nasir Ali, and a number of armed retainers. Nevertheless, under pressure from Alivardi's widow (the Begum's mother), she agreed to surrender on condition that she would keep her treasure and that her lover's life should be spared. Siraj-ud-daula, however, had no intention of losing any opportunity of humiliating possible opposition and when the Begum surrendered she was ordered to retire to the harem, her lover was banished, and her fortune was carried off to enhance the Nawab's treasury. A proportion of her fortune was, in fact, used to buy off the Nawab of Oudh, from whom Siraj-ud-daula feared an attack. The only enemies who remained to Siraj-ud-daula were Shaukat Jang and the English—who were believed to support the Begum.

The new Nawab turned his attention to his own court. He dismissed his father's ministers, replacing the diwan (or prime minister) with Mohan Lal, and the general of the household troops with Mir Madan. Mir Jafar and Rai Durlabh retained their offices. The army was now ordered to march on Purneah, where Shaukat Jang was living. On 16 May, the Nawab himself set out from the capital, but before he left he sent an order to the French and the British demanding that they demolish the fortifications that they had erected during Alivardi's illness. The French received the Nawab's emissary with courtesy, replying that 'they had not built New Works and had only Repaired One of their Bastions, which had been injured by Lightning'. The Nawab accepted this explanation. The

British, on the other hand—having already antagonised the Nawab even more over the affair of Krishna Das by expelling a messenger from Calcutta—were now indiscreet enough to reply to the Nawab in terms which could do nothing but increase his dislike for them. In his letter of reply, Mr Drake stated:

> That in the late War between our Nation and the French, they had attacked and taken the Town of Madras Contrary to the neutrality We expected would have been preserved in the Mogull's Dominions; and that there being at present great appearance of another War between the Two Crowns, We were under some apprehensions they would act in the same way in Bengal, to prevent which We were only repairing our Line of Guns to the Water-side.

When he received the letter, the Nawab jumped up from his seat, crying out: 'Who shall dare to think of commencing hostilities in my country, or presume to imagine that I have not the power to protect them?' Siraj-ud-daula now decided that he must attack the British, and stated his intentions on 28 May in a letter to Coja Wajid, the Armenian agent at Hugli.

> It has been my design to level the English fortifications raised within my jurisdiction on account of their great strength. As I have nothing at present to divert me from the execution of that resolution I am determined to make use of this opportunity; for which reason I am returning from Rajahmaul and shall use the utmost expedition in my march that I may arrive before Calcutta as soon as possible. . . . Should any person plead ever so strongly on their behalf it will avail them nothing. . . . Enclosed you will receive *perwannahs* [official grants] for the French, Dutch and Danes, in which I have assured them of my favour. I request you will deliver them, and see they are well used in their trade and other respects. Endeavour to engage those nations to prevent the English resettling themselves after I have drove them out.

At the bottom of the letter, the Nawab added in his own hand: 'I swear by the Great God and the prophets that unless the English consent to fill up their ditch, raze their fortifications, and trade upon the same terms they did in the time of [Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan], I will totally expel them from the country.' On 9 June, the Nawab's army attacked the English factory at Kasimbazar.

Such were the bare events which were to lead Siraj-ud-daula first to victory then to death, which were to lead the British first to

humiliation and then to the foundation of an empire. But before the narrative can proceed, it is essential to examine in rather more detail the causes of the conflict. After the wars were over, their causes were drowned in a flood of pamphlets and justifications explaining the conflict and the motives and behaviour of most of the principals.

Fundamentally, Siraj-ud-daula—like his predecessor—feared that the Europeans would interfere in the government of Bengal. The precedent had already been established in the south and it was obvious that the Europeans were not merely content with the privileges of trade. In Bengal, there already existed a vast body of people who disliked the government and would assist anyone who seemed capable of overthrowing it. This was the Hindu community which formed the vast majority of the population and hated its Muslim rulers for religious as well as for purely political reasons. The British in Bengal were the possessors of imperial privileges and certain rights were on their side. They were not merely foreigners, but foreigners protected by legal formality. Though the Mughal empire was falling to pieces, the prestige of imperial *firmans* was still something to be reckoned with. Because of this, the British were Siraj-ud-daula's real enemies. Some, however, of Siraj-ud-daula's reasons for attacking the British were more personal. As we have seen, they paraded their wealth—and even deliberately exaggerated its extent. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Nawab's fear should be allied with a desire for plunder.

These were the real reasons for Siraj-ud-daula's attack upon the British. His belief that they were planning to interfere in Bengal was inflamed by their replies to his letters and demands, and there is no doubt that he was convinced that the British had conspired with Ghasita Begum and Shaukat Jang. As for the official reason put forward by the Nawab for his actions, these had rather more basis in fact. The British *had* extended Calcutta's fortifications without asking the permission of the Nawab, though these defences proved useless when it came to the test. The British, too, certainly abused their trade privileges by including with the goods which they were allowed to deal in duty free other private transactions of their own and of native merchants who were prepared to pay for British protection. Nevertheless, though these offences, and the case of Krishna Das were ample justification for some sort of action, it was not

strictly necessary for the Nawab to go to war. Alivardi Khan had managed to control the Europeans by cutting off their trade until they were ready to co-operate. Siraj-ud-daula's actions could only be dictated by two of the seven deadly sins that are most fatal to autocratic rulers—pride and avarice. As for the people, they thought that at last the Nawab had gone too far; 'they hugged themselves in the expectation that the English would defeat [him] and deliver them from his tyranny and oppression'.

5

The Capture of Kasimbazar

THE NAWAB had left his capital in the middle of May and was now at Rajmahal, about three days' journey from Murshidabad. He issued orders that Kasimbazar was to be surrounded and that another force must march down and occupy a fort down-river from Calcutta, so preventing the British from calling in reinforcements. On 24 May, Mr Watts—the Englishman in charge of Kasimbazar—found the factory surrounded by troops. Their commander, Omar Beg, had also surrounded the French and Dutch settlements under the impression that he was there for the simple purpose of extorting money from any Europeans who happened to be at hand. He even allowed supplies to be carried in—and accepted a present from Mr Watts by way of thanks. Next day, however, the soldiers were withdrawn from the French and Dutch factories.

Mr Watts wrote to Calcutta for reinforcements; but he still did not expect an attack and advised that soothing letters should be sent to the Nawab. As for reinforcements, the Council at Calcutta decided not to weaken themselves by sending any. They had also been assured by an officer who had recently left Kasimbazar that the fort there could hold out against attack. Watts' actual state was perilous. He had only a few old guns and fifty men. Resistance, he knew, would be futile, and in any case all his experience—and though only thirty-eight years of age, he had been in the country for twenty years—told him that a simple monetary payment would settle the affair without recourse to arms. From the personal angle, his wife was with him and was pregnant. Negotiation and a compromise seemed the best solution from every point of view.

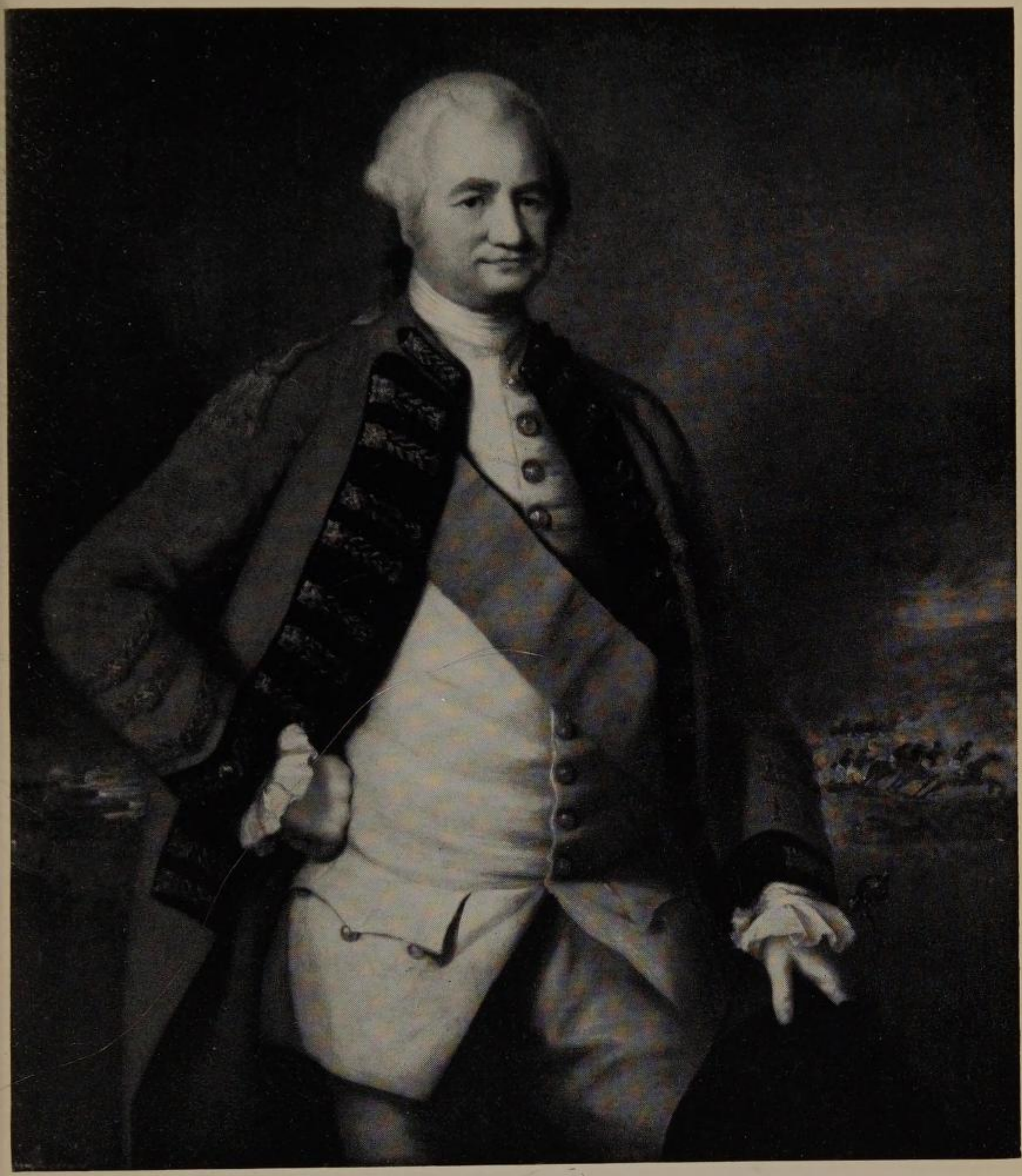
On 1 June, Siraj-ud-daula arrived at Murshidabad and commanded that Rai Durlabh should immediately take the Kasimbazar fort. At the gate, however, Rai Durlabh was turned back at bayonet

point. He therefore decided that treachery was the best form of attack. A message was sent to Watts assuring him of safe conduct and asking for a meeting; on the strength of the assurance, Watts decided to meet with Rai Durlabh and to see the Nawab who was now with his commander. At the camp, Watts was received politely by Rai Durlabh but, as he approached the Nawab's quarters, his hands were tied behind his back and he was hustled into the presence. The Nawab ordered that he be kept prisoner.

On 3 June, Siraj-ud-daula demanded that Watts sign an agreement to demolish the fortifications at Calcutta and to reimburse him for loss of revenue caused by the abuse of duty-free privileges. Watts refused on the grounds that he had no authority to agree to either demand and, when two members of his council were brought to the camp, they too maintained that they could not commit the authorities at Calcutta. They also were imprisoned, but that evening one of them was sent back to the fort with orders from the Nawab that the garrison surrender its arms. On 5 June, the Nawab set off for Calcutta, taking Watts with him.

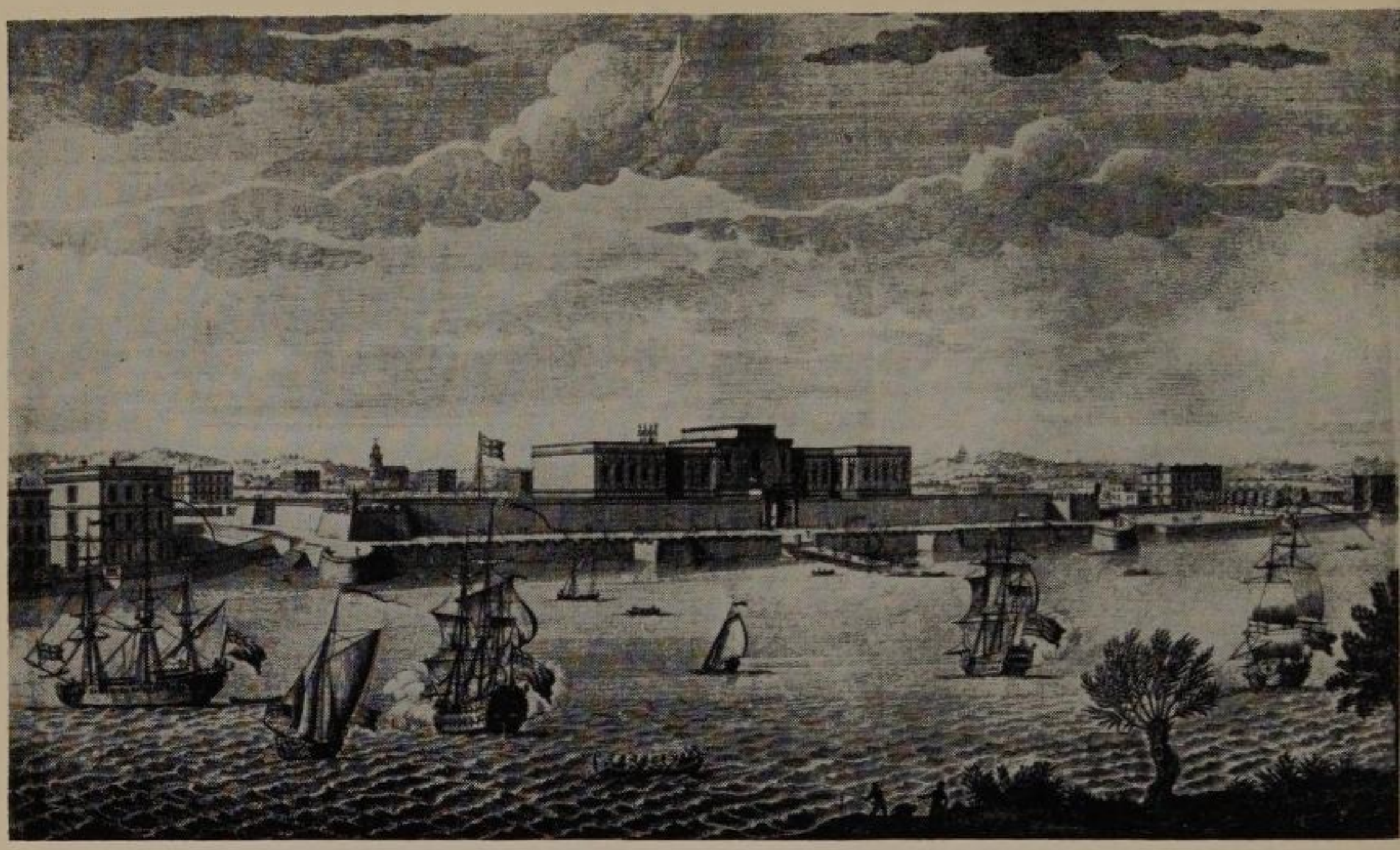
The fort at Kasimbazar was now occupied and the inmates found themselves at the mercy of the Nawab's soldiers, who set about looting, 'threatening the gentlemen to cut off their ears, slit their noses and *chabuck* [whip] them'. Lieutenant Elliot, who commanded in the fort, shot himself rather than suffer further humiliation. After this, the other Englishmen were locked in their rooms, although two contrived to escape. Mrs Watts was unmolested and was later allowed to leave for the French settlement where she was well treated by the Chief, Jean Law.

No one (not even Siraj-ud-daula) had expected the British to give in so easily. Naturally, Mr Watts was blamed by the ignorant—that is to say, by everybody except Jean Law, who wrote: 'Such was the surrender of the little fort, which many pretend could have been held out long enough to repulse the Nawab, and force him to come to terms. I am less inclined to believe this as I know the weaknesses of the place much better than its strength.' This opinion was later confirmed by no less a person than Robert Clive himself.



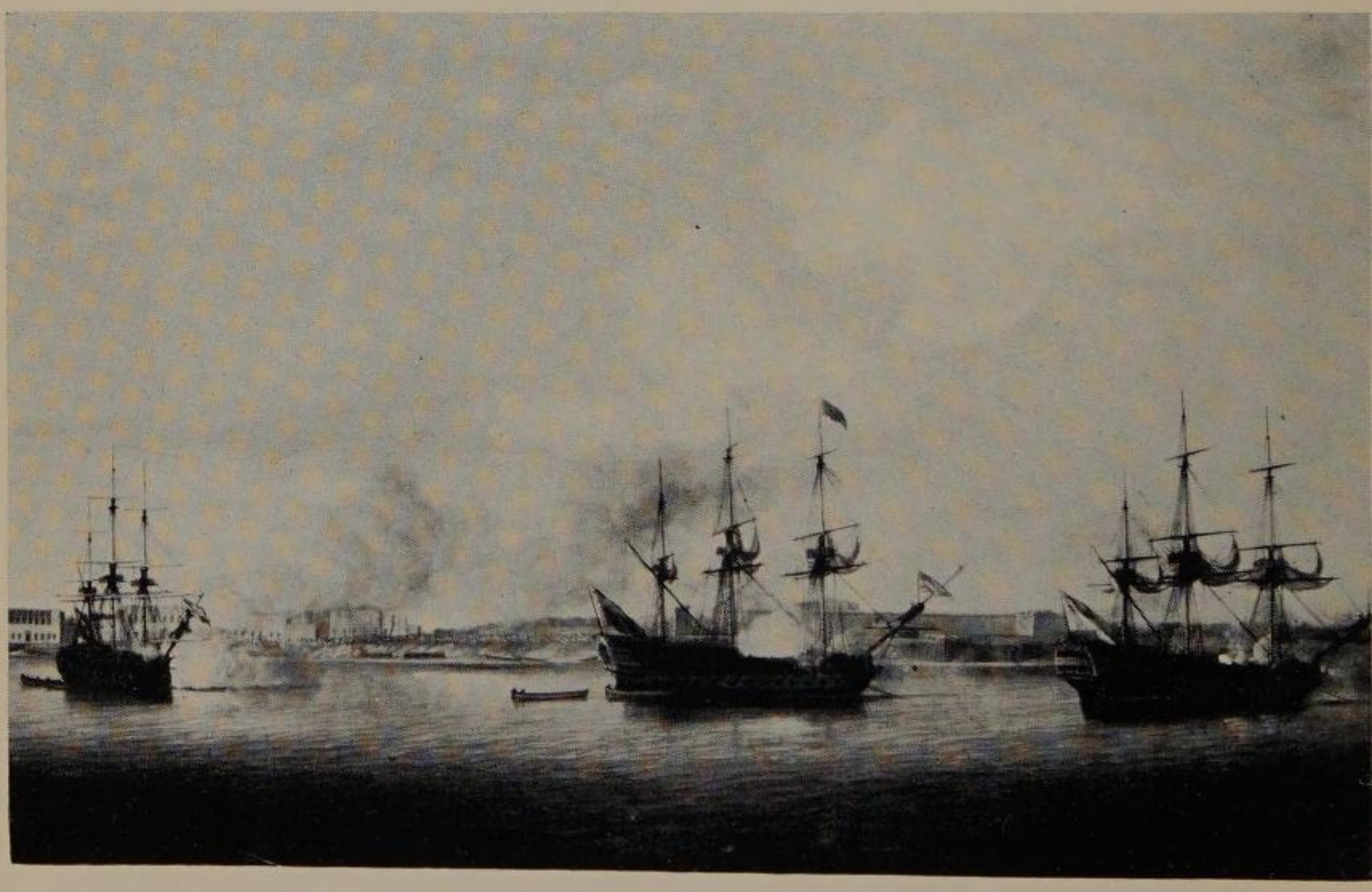
1 *Robert Clive*

From a portrait by Nathaniel Dance



2 *Fort William, Calcutta*

From an engraving by I. *van* Ryne, *1754*



3 *The Capture of Chandernagore, March 1757*

From a painting by D. Serres

6

The Attack on Calcutta

SIRAJ-UD-DAULA wasted no time in making for Calcutta. The news soon reached Fort William that 'the Nabob was determined to march to Calcutta with his whole army, estimated then at 50,000 men, besides a large train of artillery'. By the time the English received this disquieting information, the Nawab was already on his way. Despite the facts that it was the hottest time of year and that his artillery was drawn by slow-moving elephants and oxen, the Nawab and his army covered the distance of 160 miles in eleven days. Siraj-ud-daula, however, was by no means sure of success and even tried to bribe the French and Dutch into giving him assistance in exchange for the town of Calcutta. One French source reported that 'his army marched unwillingly; his people murmured loudly against him and said that he was taking them to be butchered, and that they never could capture the place'. An attempt was even made to open negotiations through Coja Wajid.

The British, on their part, had been convinced that the Nawab meant war even before the news came of his capture of Kasimbazar. The Council had decided that 'should they be attacked they were resolved to repel force by force'. Preparations had begun as far back as 20 May, with the raising of a force of native matchlockmen and the censoring of incoming and outgoing letters. Stocks of food had been laid in. Only one thing was missing—the British had prepared no plan for the defence of the city!

On 7 June, Drake had sent an appeal for help to Madras and had suggested to the French and Dutch that they should combine to resist the Nawab. This invitation was declined, the Dutch refusing to be involved and the French politely offering the British refuge in their own fort at Chandernagore. The British were convinced that the French were supporting the Nawab by supplying him with

gunpowder, though this was not in fact true. The French knew only too well that they would need all their strength and all their supplies to defend themselves, if the Nawab should choose to attack them too. The Nawab was also said to have French artillerymen in his employ, commanded by a French ex-officer, the Marquis de St Jacques.

The British had every reason to search for allies, as the chances of defending Calcutta were small. Its fortifications were puny and in a parlous state of repair. Even such few guns and scanty ammunition as there were had been allowed to deteriorate. The adjutant-general reported that there were:

> No cartridges of any kind ready. The small quantity of grape in store had lyen by so long that it was destroyed by worms; no shells fitted nor Fuses prepared for small or great. The few that were thrown at the siege burst halfway. There were 2 Iron Mortars, one of 13 and the other of 10 inches, sent out about 3 years ago. The 10 Mortar we had just finished the bed for it, but the 13 inch one lay by useless for want of one; tho' there was upwards of 300 shells sent out for both, all that could be prepared was not above 20, and such as was thrown of them burst some after quitting the mortar, other half way. We had but a small quantity of powder, and the greatest part of that damp.

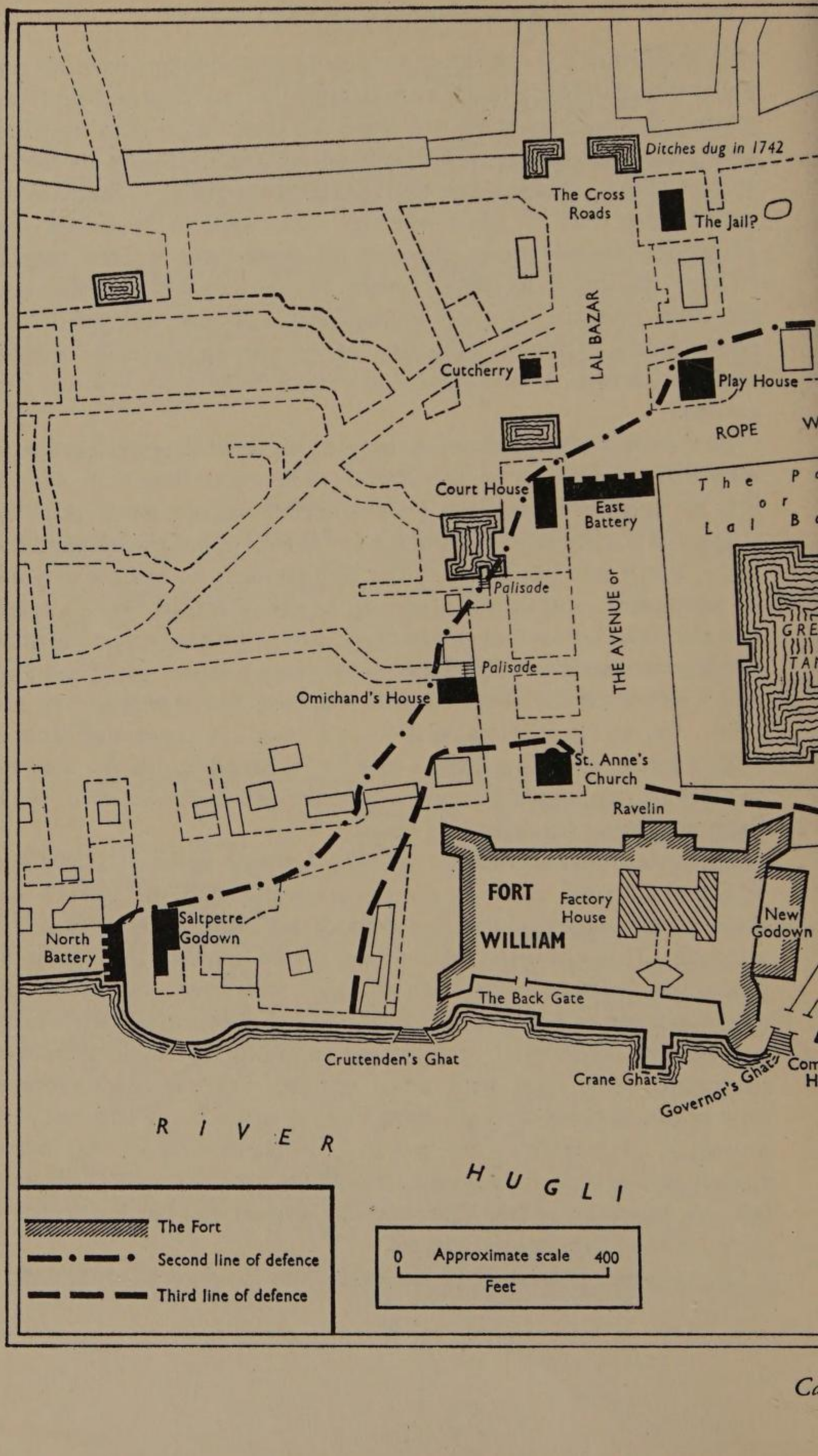
The Council finally got around to deciding on some sort of plan of defence. Only then was it discovered how few were the men actually available to carry arms. Of the regular force, seventy of the European soldiers were sick, twenty-five more were on duty in the other up-country stations, and of the remaining 180, most were Portuguese. The state of the fortifications and the smallness of the garrison virtually dictated what steps should be taken. It was decided to abandon Black Town (the native district) and to concentrate on a line round the European houses. On 7 June, Governor Drake 'by beat of drum, caused all the inhabitants of Calcutta fit to bear arms to be assembled'. The next day, two companies of militia were enrolled, made up of English, Portuguese, and Armenians, of a strength of 250 men. Unfortunately, they were completely untrained, so that—as Holwell was later to record—'when We came to action there was hardly any amongst the Armenian and Portuguese inhabitants, and but few among the European Militia, who knew the Right from the Wrong end of their pieces [matchlocks]'. Despite all

this, the British did not expect to have to defend themselves. No one really thought, 'even to the very last day that the Nabob would ever venture to attack us or offer to force our lines'. And even if he did, the opinion was that he would be repulsed. The civilians were indeed so sure of this—and sure too that the credit should go to them for his defeat—that two of their number were appointed colonel and lieutenant-colonel, ranks superior to those held by the regular military officers of the establishment. It must be admitted, however, that their competence could hardly have been less than that of the commandant, Captain Minchin, or of the second-in-command, Captain Clayton. Unfortunately for the British, neither was it any greater.

In the meanwhile, soft words were being used in an endeavour to turn away the wrath of the Nawab. The Armenian, Coja Wajid, sent his agent to Drake on 7 June with the draft of a letter which he suggested the governor should send to the Nawab. Drake signed the letter, but it was not given to the Nawab until the middle of June by which time hostilities had already begun. But Coja Wajid's agent had also told Drake that it was Omichand—the banker, and former British intermediary with the Nawab—who had instigated the Nawab's attack on the British as a revenge for being deprived of his office. On 10 June, Coja Wajid again sent his agent to Calcutta with a letter informing Drake that he intended to see the Nawab in a day or two, but that Drake ought nevertheless to continue with the preparations for defending the city.

For some unexplained reason, the Council believed that Coja Wajid anticipated reaching some agreement with the Nawab on their behalf, and decided to reinforce his hand with a show of strength. This consisted of sending fifteen soldiers in a boat to Sukhsagar, halfway to the town of Hugli, with instructions to make as much noise as possible. They carried out these orders with such success that the Nawab, anticipating an attack on Hugli, hastened to occupy that town with 2,000 cavalry. Contradictory reports now began to come through from English spies; some said that the morale of the Nawab's army was low, others that his soldiers were already anticipating the loot they would lay hands on when Calcutta fell. All, however, agreed that local landowners had been instructed to cut off food supplies to Calcutta.

On 11 June, Governor Drake assembled his forces. Altogether,


Ditches dug in 1742
The Cross Roads
The Jail?
LAL BAZAR
Cutcherry
Play House
ROPE
Court House
East Battery
Palisade
Palisade
THE AVENUE or
Omichand's House
St. Anne's Church
Ravelin
FORT WILLIAM
Factory House
New Godown
Saltpetre Godown
North Battery
The Back Gate
Cruttenden's Ghat
Crane Ghat
Governor's Ghat
RIVER HUGLI
The Fort
Second line of defence
Third line of defence
0 Approximate scale 400
Feet

Palisade

Palisade

LITTLE TANK

Calico Printers

Company's Stables

South Battery

The Hospital

Magazine

Burying Ground

Ditches dug in 1742

eserve
ttery

d Dock

The Ditch

Chandpal Ghat

~ARTHUR BANKS~

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with regulars, militia and volunteers, they amounted to some 515 men. These were now posted around the 'defences' as follows (see plan, p. 42): ninety-eight men at the eastern battery or court-house, under the command of Clayton and Holwell; a further ninety-eight under Buchanan and Macket at the southern battery; sixty-eight men under Smith and Mapletoft at the northern battery; and the remainder of militia and artillery in the fort, commanded by Minchin and Bellamy. An ensign (Piccard) with twenty-five men manned the redoubt at Perrin's, while three ships—the *Prince George,* the *Fortune,* and the *Chance*—were sent to cover the redoubt, and twenty artillerymen and volunteers formed a reserve. The native inhabitants of Black Town were authorised to defend themselves as best they might. Sensibly, most of them left the town altogether.

Watts and Collet, the two merchants from Kasimbazar who had been carried off with the Nawab's army, sent a letter to Drake on 12 June through the good offices of the Dutch. They said they believed that the Nawab could still be bought off; the British, however, were no longer prepared to negotiate, for they still thought they could frighten the Nawab with their military preparations. An attempt was made through Roman Catholic priests to persuade the Nawab's gunners—who, being French and Portuguese, were Christians—to leave their Muslim master so as not to fight against fellow-Christians, but they replied that they were constantly watched and were therefore unable to escape. The British also kept close watch for spies and, on 13 June, the order was given to arrest anyone who appeared at all suspicious. On that day, a boat was seized and though its occupants 'denied they had any letters for any person', they were found 'after receiving punishment' to have two letters addressed to Omichand from Raja Ram, the 'principal spy of the Nabob'. These letters were written in dialect and Drake, unable to understand them, was convinced that they contained 'treasonable communications'. Coja Wajid's agent had already told Drake that Omichand was responsible for encouraging the Nawab to march on Calcutta and Drake, therefore, without consulting his Council, ordered Omichand's arrest. The merchant did not resist but his brother-in-law was captured only after a fight, and one of Omichand's servants, 'who was an Indian of high caste, set fire to the house, and in order to save the women of the family from the

dishonour of being exposed to strangers, entered their apartments and killed, it is said, thirteen of them with his own hand, after which he stabbed himself, but, contrary to his intentions, not mortally'. When the British occupied the house, they found it full of weapons despite an order that had earlier been made for the surrender of all arms. This was taken as indisputable confirmation of Omichand's guilt. Krishna Das was also, after a fight, imprisoned in the fort.

The Nawab's army was now only a short distance from Calcutta. Drake's spies reported that it numbered between 30,000 and 50,000 men, and that it included 150 elephants and camels as well as the guns that had been looted from Kasimbazar, twenty-five Europeans, and 200 Portuguese gunners. On 16 June, the Englishwomen in White Town retired into the fort along with about 2,000 Portuguese (in reality, Eurasian) men, women, and children. The Black Town was now deserted by its inhabitants. Soon the sound of guns could be heard as the Nawab's artillery engaged the *Fortune* and the *Chance,* which were defending Perrin's Redoubt. There, Ensign Piccard with his twenty-five men stood fast against six guns and 4,000 men. With the aid of a small reinforcement, he finally drove the enemy off at half-past six in the evening.

> At midnight nothing was moving in the thickets; for every man, after eating his meal, had as usual betook himself to sleep; which Ensign Piccard, who had served on the coast of Coromandel, suspected from their silence, and crossing the rivulet at midnight with his party, seized and spiked the four pieces of cannon, beat up and drove all the troops out of the thicket, and returned without the loss of a man.

The enemy was believed to have lost about eighty dead.

The Nawab's force merely pulled out until they found some less well-defended place—and there were many, for the Maratha Ditch, which was full of debris, was easy to cross in many places. With the Nawab's camp were said to be 7,000 professional looters, who quickly got across and into the town. The Nawab himself is reported to have crossed over a bridge made for him at Cow Cross Gate, where the hired native matchlockmen deserted to him. Siraj-ud-daula established his headquarters in what had been Omichand's garden.

Many of the looters were taken prisoner but the reports they were induced to give of the size of the Nawab's army and of his intentions were confusing. Nor, in practice, could the information supplied

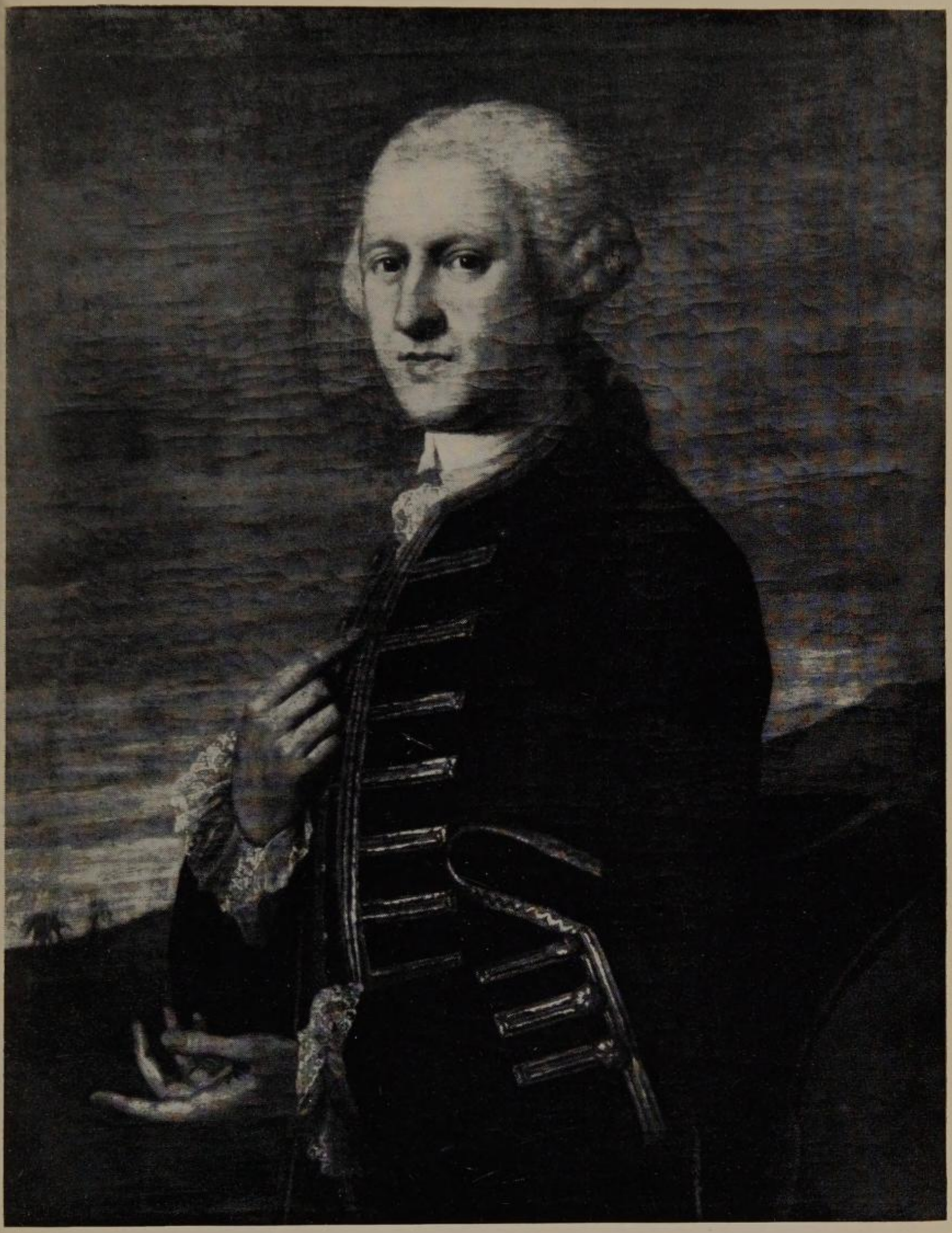
by spies be depended upon. Nevertheless, all seemed to agree that it was the Nawab's intention to attack the fort on 18 June—an auspicious day in the Muslim calendar, as it corresponded with the nineteenth day of the fast of Ramadan. Whatever his plans, it was necessary for Siraj-ud-daula to get his artillery across the ditch and, in order to do this, he contemplated renewing the attack at Perrin's Redoubt. This turned out not to be necessary as Omichand's servant —he who had killed the women and attempted suicide—had somehow recovered from his wounds and managed, with another of his master's servants, to escape with a letter from Omichand to the Nawab. This letter explained that the ditch did not extend all the way round the town, and that there was a way in which the servant would show him.

In an endeavour to delay the Nawab, the British had on the evening of the 16th set fire to part of the town. The next day, the Nawab returned the compliment by setting fire to the Great Bazaar and parts of the Black Town. Between them, the British and the Nawab produced a scene 'too horrible for language'. By the close of the day, many of the coolies and native matchlockmen hired by the British had deserted. This left the British in such a state that:

> . . . We had not a Black Fellow to draw or work a gun, not even to carry a cotton bale or sandbag on ye Ramparts; and what work of that kind had been done was by the Military and Militia. This want of workmen at last and scarcity at ye beginning harass'd us Prodigiously, and prevented our doing several works that would have been necessary.

To add to the confusion, the Armenian and Portuguese militia demanded that their women and children should be brought into the fort. Though about 500 were embarked on board ship, nearly 2,000 were taken into the fort.

The morning of the 18th brought proof of the Nawab's true intentions, for his men began to infiltrate the city, by-passing the batteries and occupying those houses which still remained after the fire and could be used to direct shooting at the defenders. About eight o'clock, a large body of Siraj-ud-daula's troops began to occupy the houses commanding the southern battery and to pour shot and ball into it. The British found that their own artillery had little effect when turned against the solid mortar of these houses. An hour later, an attempt was made against the northern battery



4 *William Watts*

From a print in the possession of the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations after a portrait ascribed to John Zoffany

5 *Siraj-ud-daula*

Detail from a print after a contemporary portrait

6 J. Z. *Holwell superintending the erection of the monument on the site of the 'Black Hole', Calcutta*

Detail from an engraving after a contemporary painting

but this was broken up by grape-shot. About eleven o'clock, an attack strengthened by two cannon, 'one of them an 18 lb by the size of the ball', was mounted upon the jail which, though defended until two o'clock, had finally to be evacuated and was occupied by the enemy.

> Tho' our men from the tops and windows of the houses kept a constant fire on them as they advanced, and our cannon from the Fort and our Batterys played on every house they could see them in possession of, and endeavour'd tho' with little success, to fling shell amongst them (which had they been properly fitted for service would have been of more use than our cannon), yet the superiority of their numbers under cover of the Houses at all quarters made it impossible for our people to withstand such showers of small shott as they fired into the houses we had possession of.

Though virtually every inch was fought over, by five o'clock the Nawab's forces 'had now possess'd the Houses in all quarters of the town in Multitudes, and by their superiority obliged most of the men to quit the Houses they occupied'. At that time the commander of the eastern battery, Captain Clayton, decided that the battery could no longer be held and sent Holwell back to the fort to 'represent the state of the Battery and receive orders whether it should be withdrawn or maintained'. Holwell was given orders to

> withdraw it immediately and spike up the cannon we could not bring off. I [Holwell] returned with these orders, and to my astonishment found the two 18-Pounders and one of the 6-Pounders on the Battery spiked up, and the Post in such confusion as bars all description. There was nothing could have prevented their bringing off the cannon and making the most regular and soldier-like retreat, had we been commanded by an officer of Resolution and Judgement, but as it was, our Retreat had more the appearance of a confused Rout, bringing off only one Field-Piece and the cannon spiked with so little art that they were easily drilled and turned against us.

The guns that were left behind, inadequately spiked, were also used later to great effect against the British in the fort. It was now decided that, with the evacuation of the eastern battery, a retreat must be made to the inner line of defence, to the great houses which surrounded the fort. The other batteries were therefore called in and Ensign Piccard and his men were taken off by boat from Perrin's Redoubt. By nightfall, all had been evacuated, 'and most people said that the fall of them would be attended with fatal consequences'.

The position of the British was now critical. They had hoped to frighten Siraj-ud-daula with the vigour of their defence. They had not only failed in this but had also been forced to give up a line which they had hoped to defend (if necessary) for several days, after a mere few hours' fighting. To help defend their new line, the British occupied St Anne's Church, the houses belonging to Mr Eyre and Mr Cruttenden, and the Company House. Two sea-captains were placed in command of the guns in each bastion of the fort. Everyone else now crowded into the fort itself, except for the remaining coolies who wisely made off into the countryside.

Conditions within the fort were now chaotic and, after a Council meeting which ended about 8.30 p.m., the European women were ordered on board the ships. The garrison was now so dispirited and fatigued 'that it was impossible to raise them even if ye enemy had been scaling ye walls. Three different times did ye Drums beat to arms, but in vain, not a man could be got to stand to their arms, tho' we had frequent Alarms of ye enemy preparing under our walls to scale them.' Fortunately, the beating of the drums gave the impression that the garrison was ready for action, and the enemy withdrew.

Down with the ships were 'Colonel' Manningham and 'Lieuten-ant-Colonel' Frankland who had been sent with the European women to ensure their safety. These two gentlemen preferred to remain on board the ship *Dodalay* (of which they were part-owners) to returning to the fort, though they pretended they were merely waiting for a guard to escort them back. At about one o'clock in the morning, an informal Council was called by Drake. The military officers present reported that their men were no longer under control, that many were drunk and defiant.

> The Majority of the military officers gave it as their opinion, that it was impractical to defend the fort with so small a garrison and so unprovided with stores for a siege, against the numerous army of the enemy; the artillery officers reported they had not enough powder and shot for three days; our bombs and grenades were of no use, the fusees being spoiled by the dampness of the climate owing to their being filled some years and never looked into afterwards.

It was therefore unanimously agreed that the fort should be evacuated and a retreat made to the ships. But when was the retreat to be made? An argument arose as to whether the retreat should take place immediately, under cover of night, or whether it should

be deferred until the next day. Nor was there any agreement as to the manner in which a general retreat should be conducted so as to minimise 'confusion or tumult'. It was finally resolved to 'defer the retreat until the next night and that all the next day be employed in embarking the Portuguese women and our valuable effects, by which means we should avoid the disorder we dreaded'. Messrs Manningham and Frankland were ordered to come ashore—but did not see why they should. The Council was broken up in unseemly disorder when a cannonball erupted into the room.

The next day brought further attacks. The Company House, from which the enemy had driven the little garrison, was now reoccupied by Ensign Piccard and twenty men. But the firing was so intense that the house was again evacuated at nine o'clock. By midday all the garrisons from the houses round the fort had been withdrawn. Early in the morning, in immense confusion, the Portuguese women had begun to embark upon the ships. There was no plan and no organisation; everyone was left to look after herself. The boats were overloaded and several sank. 'Most of those who had crowded into them were drowned, and such as floated with the tide to the shore were either made prisoners or massacred; for the enemy had taken possession of all the houses and inclosures along the bank of the river, from which stations they shot fire-arrows into the ships and vessels in hope of burning them.'

About ten o'clock, the garrison in the fort was astounded to see the little fleet of ships pull away down river, and at the same moment Governor Drake was informed that all the reserves of gunpowder were damp and useless. Unfortunately, this information was overheard and caused a stampede of Portuguese women to the remaining boats. About 200 of them, with their children, were drowned. The enemy was now reported to be about to cut off access to the river, and Drake ordered that the gate leading to the water be closed and guns sent to defend it. No one paid any attention to his commands. It was then that the governor joined Captain Minchin and those others who were beating a retreat to the boats. When those left in the fort saw that the governor and most of the chief merchants had deserted, there was an outburst of rage and terror—as well there might be, when all knew that there was no hope of a successful defence against Siraj-ud-daula's forces and that the line of retreat had been severed by their own countrymen.

On board the ships which had now pulled down the river, some of those who had been under the impression that a general retreat had been ordered now tried to get back ashore, but no boatman could be found willing to risk the journey under the guns of the Nawab's army. Only one of the commanders, Captain Nicholson, of the *Hunter,* was prepared to make any attempt to rescue the garrison, and he was prevented from doing so by the threat that his native seamen would jump overboard and desert him. Most of the ships were privately owned and their captains were not prepared to take the risk of their being sunk. An order was, however, given to the *Prince George*—which was still above the fort, off Perrin's Redoubt—to drop down and take off the remainder of the garrison. The next day, 19 June, the defenders in the fort saw the *Prince George* bearing down and their hopes of relief grew only to be shattered when the ship (through the pilot's bad management) went aground. The Englishmen aboard escaped into Dutch hands, and the Dutch surrendered them to the Nawab. They were later set free unharmed, although the ship itself was set on fire by the natives.

As night fell, those on board the other ships could not see the fort for the smoke and flames sent up by the burning houses which surrounded it. Next morning, the enemy appeared to be at the walls. By the afternoon, it became obvious that the fort had surrendered and the ships therefore sailed lower down the river—to Surman's Gardens—where they were joined by a few fugitives from the fort. The little squadron consisted of the *Dodalay, Fame, Lively, Diligence, Anne, Fortune, London, Neptune, Calcutta, Hunter,* and four or five others.

On the morning of the 21st, as no more fugitives arrived and as there seemed a threat of attack, the ships pulled further down river and tried to pass the fort at Tanna, but the *Neptune* and the *Calcutta* ran aground and were captured and looted. The rest of the fleet, which had returned to Surman's Gardens, was now joined by the *Speedwell* and the *Bombay* which had come up river past the fort of Tanna. Once again, an attempt was made to pass and this time the attempt was successful. On 24 June, the fleet reached Budge Budge where it was joined by a galley, the *Success* from Madras. The *Diligence,* however, went aground and was lost.

The British now heard that the Nawab was fortifying Budge Budge

and had given orders that no provisions were to be supplied to the ships. This was sad news, as they were very short of supplies, 'not having a week's sustenance in the fleet of either food, wood or water, every vessel being crowded with men, women, and children, country-born Portuguese'. The British now put ashore all those who 'had no connection with the Europeans', and finally anchored at Fulta on 26 June, where the Dutch—who had a small factory there—secretly supplied them with food and other stores. By good fortune, and through no other cause, the retreat had been a success. Certainly, if the gunners at the Tanna fort had been competent at their jobs, the ships could easily have been sunk.

7

The Black Hole

THE DESERTION of Drake and Minchin left the defenders of the fort with only about 170 men excluding the Portuguese and Armenians. A meeting was called and it was decided that Governor Drake and those other members of Council who had escaped with him should be suspended from office; and, though Mr Pearkes was the senior member remaining, Holwell was called upon to take command.

Holwell refused to share the civil powers of governor with Pearkes, and was appointed governor and administrator of the Company's affairs. It was immediately decided to evacuate the fort by using the *Prince George,* then at Perrin's Redoubt, and a native ship which had been captured at the beginning of the siege. In the meantime, however, since there were such small numbers of men available, it seemed wisest to evacuate the surrounding houses and concentrate the defending force inside the fort. Holwell made the rounds of the defence, promising that three chests of treasure still remaining in the fort would be divided amongst the garrison if they could hold out long enough for the embarkation to be organised. As for the other ships lying down river, 'signals were thrown out from every part of the fort for the ships to come up again to their stations'. But, as we have seen, 'there was never a single effort made to send a boat or vessell to bring off the garrison'.

The enemy was again attacking in vast numbers and the garrison in the church was badly mauled, many being killed and wounded.

In order to prevent this havoc as much as possible, we got up a quantity of broadcloth in bales, with which we made traverses along the curtains and bastions; we fixed up likewise some bales of cotton against the parapets (which were very thin and of brickwork only) to resist the cannon-balls, and did everything in our power to baffle their attempts.

Inspired by hopes of retreat and, no doubt, by Holwell's promises of lavish reward, the men of the garrison fought bravely. By the evening, however, their enthusiasm had waned but the enemy, as usual, stopped attacking when it grew dark. Nevertheless, one of the garrison wrote:

> The night was not less dreadful on that account; the Company's House, Mister Cruttenden's, Mister Nixon's, Dr Knox's, and the marine yards were now in flames, and exhibited a spectacle of unspeakable horror. We were surrounded on all sides by the Nabob's forces, which made a retreat by land impracticable.

During the night, the soldiers refused to obey their officers and, breaking open the quarters of the 'officers that had absconded, and taking from thence what wine and spirits they could lay their hands on, by which means they began to be mutinous and unruly'. A corporal and fifty-six soldiers, mostly Dutch mercenaries, deserted to the Nawab's force.

Next day, Sunday 20 June, the attack began again with undiminished vigour. Though Siraj-ud-daula's forces were overwhelmingly superior in numbers, they were repulsed again and again. But the defenders were losing heavily and ammunition was almost exhausted. By midday, the defence had according to Holwell lost '25 killed and 70 or more of our best men wounded and our Train [artillerymen] killed, wounded and deserted to all but 14 and not two hours' ammunition left'. It was decided to call for a truce.

In the excitement of the siege, it appears that Omichand—still imprisoned in the fort—had been forgotten. When Holwell remembered that he was still there, he persuaded him to write a letter to Raja Manik Chand, one of Siraj-ud-daula's intimates, to ask him to intercede on behalf of the British. About two o'clock, a man was noticed outside the fort, making signs for the defenders to stop firing. Holwell held a shouted conversation with him from the ramparts and was informed that, if the British would cease fighting, some arrangement might be concluded. Holwell, thinking this was a reply to Omichand's letter and hoping to keep the enemy quiet until nightfall, when the garrison might be able to quit the fort and board the *Prince George*—he was not aware that the ship had run aground and been abandoned—ran up a flag of truce and told his men to rest. About four o'clock, news was brought to him that

'some of the enemy was advancing with a Flagg in his Hand and called us to cease firing, and that we should have quarter if We surrendered'. Holwell went off to the south-east bastion.

> I had a letter prepared with me addressed to Roy Doolub, the General of the Forces, Importing an overture to cease hostilities until the Suba could be wrote to and His pleasure known. This Letter I threw over the Ramparts and Hoisted the Flagg of Truce on the Bastion. The Letter was taken up by the Person who advanced with the Flagg, who retired with it. Soon after multitudes of the Enemy came out of their hiding-Places round us and Flocked under the Walls; a short Parley ensued. I demanded a Truce to Hostilities untill the Suba's pleasure could be known. To which I was answered by one of His officers from below that the Suba was there, and His pleasure was that we should have quarter. I was going to reply when at that Instant Mr William Baillie, standing near me, was slightly wounded by a Muskett-ball from the enemy on the side of the Head, and Word was brought to me that they were attempting to force the South-West Barrier and were cutting at the Eastern Gate.

While this was going on, the Nawab's soldiers had been scaling the north-west bastion and killing the garrison, and the western gate of the fort was opened by a Dutch sergeant named Hedleburgh —either in an attempt to escape, or by arrangement with those Dutch who had deserted the previous night. The enemy now poured through the gate and Holwell, 'thinking that further opposition would not only be fruitless, but might be attended with bad consequences to the garrison', joined with Captain Buchanan and 'delivered up their swords to a Jemmautdar [native officer] that had scaled the walls and seemed to act with some authority'. The siege was over.

Siraj-ud-daula, carried in a palanquin and accompanied by his younger brother, now entered the fort. There he 'admired the building, adding that the English must be fools to oblige him to drive them out of so fine a city'. He ordered Mr Holwell (who had been put in irons) to be freed from them and that the rest of the English prisoners should be treated 'with humanity'. Holwell had three interviews with the Nawab that evening and again received assurances from him 'on the word of a soldier, that no harm should come to us'. Siraj-ud-daula was particularly bitter against Governor Drake and had the Factory House, which he believed belonged to him, burnt down. The Nawab then left the fort and settled

in one of the European houses for the night. No attempt was made to detain the Armenians and Portuguese, who left the city, and several Europeans walked out of the fort and escaped—some joining the ships down river at Surman's Gardens. Holwell was offered the opportunity to escape through a secret passage by the Company's carpenter, who had a boat ready, but he refused to leave.

This man [wrote Holwell after his release] had made his escape when the Moors entered the fort, and returned just as it was dark to tell me he had provided a boat and would insure my escape, if I would follow him through a passage few were acquainted with, and by which he had entered. (This might easily have been accomplished, as the guard put over us took but slight notice of us.) I thanked him in the best terms I was able, but told him it was a step I could not prevail upon myself to take, as I should thereby very ill repay the attachment the gentlemen and the garrison had shown me; and that I was resolved to share their fate, be what it should; but pressed him to secure his own escape without loss of time, to which he gallantly replied, that 'then he was resolved to share mine, and would not leave me.

So far, no one had been ill-treated, though one of the English, John Cooke, reported 'we were rifled of our watches, buckles, buttons etcetera. The Bales of broadcloth, chests of Coral, Plate and Treasure lying in the apartments of the gentlemen who resided in the factory were broken open.' But this comparative calm was not to last. Some European soldiers who were drunk began to assault the natives—who complained to the Nawab. He asked if there was no dungeon where European defaulters had been confined, and was told that there was a part of the barracks that had been converted into a cell. It was called the Black Hole: a name given officially by the British to any garrison lock-up normally used for confining drunken soldiers. This name was not, in fact, abandoned in the army until 1868.

It was suggested to the Nawab that all the prisoners should be confined in this cell for the night, to avoid the risk of their escaping. The Nawab agreed—and it is reasonable to assume that he did not know that the Black Hole was a room only about eighteen feet long and fourteen wide, with only two airholes (barricaded with iron bars) which opened into a low piazza.

The prisoners were now collected under an arched veranda, or piazza, to the south of the main gateway of the fort. Soon they were ordered to enter the barracks and then forced by the guards into the Black Hole.

> This stroke was so sudden, so unexpected, and the throng and the pressure so great upon us next the door of the Black Hole prison, that there was no resisting it; but like one agitated wave impelling another, we were obliged to give way and enter; the rest followed like a torrent, few amongst us, the soldiers excepted, having the least idea of the dimensions or the nature of a place we had never seen; for if we had, we should at all events have rushed upon the guard and been, as the lesser evil, by our own choice cut to pieces.

In this little room, 146 prisoners—including one woman and twelve wounded officers—were kept on one of the hottest nights of the year, from about seven in the evening until six the next morning. The events of that night have been described with graphic, one might say dramatic, passion by Holwell. To us, however, inured to the horror of concentration camps, to deliberate cruelty practised with deliberate efficiency, Holwell's narrative does not convey the genuine horror of that hot Indian night. Even the language he uses seems to drain terror from his description. Bald facts alone can convey it. As the dawn broke, and those that were at the windows appealed to the guards to let them out, it occurred to one of them that Holwell was perhaps the only man with sufficient influence to obtain their release. He was found, identifiable only by his shirt, under a pile of dead. There were still signs of life:

> But as life was equally dear to every man (and the stench arising from the dead bodies was grown intolerable), no one would give up his station near the window, so they were obliged to carry me back again. But soon Captain Mills (now Captain of the Company's yacht), who was in possession of a seat in the window, had the humanity to offer to resign it. I was again brought by the same gentlemen and placed in the window.

Soon a native officer, sent by Siraj-ud-daula, came to enquire whether Holwell was alive.

> They showed me to him; told him I had appearance of life remaining and believed I might recover if the door was opened very soon. This answer being returned to the Suba, an order came immediately for our release, it being then near six in the morning.

The door was opened and twenty-three persons emerged alive. The remaining 123 had died of suffocation.

Siraj-ud-daula then sent for the half-conscious Holwell and demanded to know where the rest of the treasure was hidden, as the spoils had been much less than he had been led to believe. Holwell exhaustedly protested his ignorance and, with three other survivors, was handed over to one of the Nawab's officers (Mir Madan) and, on 24 June, taken to Murshidabad where they arrived after a bitter fortnight's journey. The Nawab did not himself arrive until four days later and it was 16 July before the prisoners were once more brought before him.

> The wretched spectacle we made must, I think, have made an impression on a breast the most brutal, and if he is capable of pity or contrition his heart felt it then. I think it appeared in spight of him, in his countenance. He gave me no reply, but ordered a *soota-purdar* and *chubdar* to see our irons cut off, and to conduct us wherever we chose to go, and to take care we received no trouble nor insult; and having repeated this order distinctly, directed his retinue to go on.

Though pressure was put upon the Nawab to send the prisoners back to Calcutta where they could be tortured and made to disclose the whereabouts of the treasure that was supposedly concealed there, the Nawab showed uncharacteristic clemency. 'If he [Holwell] has anything left,' he said, 'he may keep it. His sufferings have been great. He shall have his liberty.'

The released prisoners were taken in by the Dutch who worked the Nawab's Mint and, towards the end of the month, they were able to make their way to Hugli. About 12 August, the four men joined the rest of the British down river at Fulta. One of them, Ensign Walcott, died there from the wounds he had received at Calcutta and the ill-treatment to which he had been subjected after its surrender.

All the surviving British who were left in Calcutta after Holwell's departure were ordered to leave the city under threat of having their noses and ears cut off. The Nawab renamed Calcutta, Alinagar, and built a mosque inside the fort.

The Black Hole was to become a part of Britain's imperial mythology, one of those simple, apparently clearcut events which are enshrined for ever in the mind of the schoolboy, and which have a

surprising influence on the actions of soldiers and administrators. Atrocities, both real and imagined, have been among the most prolific causes of colonial expansion. The lush prose of Macaulay—in which he frequently lost himself as in an exotic jungle—established Siraj-ud-daula as the monster responsible for the Black Hole. Macaulay saw him seated 'on the eve of the battle of Plassey, gloriously in his tent, haunted—as a Greek poet would have said—by the furies of those that cursed him with their last breath in the Black Hole'—a description redolent of the art of the novelist rather than of the serious historian. It seems unlikely that Siraj-ud-daula, who had ordered Holwell to be released from his chains, was responsible for the atrocity. Those who suffered in the Black Hole did not blame the Nawab for their sufferings, for it was commonly held at the time that it was Omichand who had been responsible for the ill-treatment of the prisoners, though this too is an over-simplification. The tragedy of the Black Hole was the result of a mixture of revenge (for the Nawab's forces are said to have lost over 7,000 killed in the siege) and indifference—for what did it really matter to the Nawab's soldiers if a few Englishmen died of suffocation? This explanation does not excuse the cruelty, but it helps to put it into proper perspective.

8

The Fruits of Victory

THE NAWAB, after renaming Calcutta and ordering the erection of a mosque inside the fort, left the city on 24 June under the governorship of Manik Chand, a Hindu, a man described by Ghulam Khan 'as presumptuous, arrogant, destitute of capacity and wholly without courage'. The reasons for the appointment of a weak commander at Calcutta were perfectly simple. It had always been the policy of the Nawabs of Bengal to make appointments to such offices—where a strong man might gain enough strength to threaten the government—from the ranks of those who were not likely, or sufficiently capable, to take advantage of the opportunity. Furthermore, the Nawab was convinced by his victory that he had nothing to fear from the British in future. He did not even bother to pursue the deserters from Calcutta to their anchorage at Fulta. Jean Law, the French Chief at Kasimbazar, wrote:

> Siraj-ud-daula had the most extravagant contempt for Europeans; a pair of slippers, said he, is all that is needed to govern them. Their number, according to him, could not in all Europe come up to more than ten or twelve thousand men. What fear, then, would he have of the English nation, which assuredly could not present to his mind more than a quarter of the whole? He was, therefore, very far from thinking that the English could entertain the idea of reestablishing themselves by force. To humiliate themselves—to offer money with one hand, and receive joyously with the other his permission to reestablish themselves—was the whole project which he could naturally suppose them to have formed. It is to this idea, without doubt, that the tranquillity in which he left them at Fulta is due.

The French and Dutch, although they were hardly pleased by the defeat of the British by a native power and although they did all they could to help the survivors of the siege, were not above feeling a

sense of satisfaction over the destruction of a major trade rival. Both expected to do very well out of an increased share in the commerce of the country. The Nawab, however, in his supreme confidence had other ideas. After leaving Calcutta, he appeared outside Hugli on 25 June, surrounded the town and sent messages to the French and Dutch to the effect that, if they did not immediately pay him large sums of money, he would tear down their flag and destroy their fortifications. Presented with a demand for two million rupees, the Dutch were dumbfounded and threatened to close their trading establishment and leave the country. An accommodation was, however, arrived at through Coja Wajid and the Nawab agreed to accept 450,000 rupees instead. This the Dutch borrowed (at nine per cent interest) from the Seths. The French, after negotiations which almost ended in a fight, were let off with a payment of 350,000 rupees, which, as they had recently received a sum of money from France, was paid off in gold. The British firmly believed that the smallness of this payment was due to the fact that the French had assisted the Nawab against the British.

> It was understood [wrote Watts in his *Memoirs of the Revolution*] that the favour shown them in comparison with the Dutch after the destruction of our Settlements, when he affected to fine both nations for augmenting the works about their respective Factories, was in consideration of their having secretly furnished artillery when he marched against Calcutta. This was a suspicion in the Indies and as such only is mentioned; but it is very certain that the letters wrote home to Europe were entirely in Siraj-ud-daula's favour, containing a very unfair, and, which was much worse, a very plausible, but utterly false, representation of the grounds of the quarrel, which was published to our prejudice in all the foreign gazettes.

The Nawab did not destroy the fortifications at Chandernagore or Chinsurah. They, as we know, were weak and could easily be overcome whenever the Nawab chose. In the meanwhile, the Europeans could be squeezed much more profitably if they were allowed to trade.

On 28 June, Watts and Collet, who had been carried around with the Nawab's army since their capture at Kasimbazar, were released and sent to the French at Chandernagore. With them went a peculiarly apologetic letter from the Nawab addressed to Mr Pigot, the East India Company's chief merchant at Madras.

Directore Pigot, of high and great rank, and greatest of the merchants, May you be possessor of the *Patcha's* [Emperor's] favour.

It was not my intention to remove the merchantile business of the Company belonging to you from out of the *subah* of Bengal, but Roger Drake, your *gomasta* was a very wicked and unruly man and began to give protection to persons who had accounts with the *Patcha* in the *koatey* [factory]. Notwithstanding all my admonitions, yet he did not desist from his shameless actions. Why should these people who come to transact the mercantile affairs of the Company be doers of such actions? However that shameless man has met with the desert of his actions and was expelled this *subah*. I gave leave to Mr Watts who is a helpless, poor, and innocent man to go to you. As I esteem you to be a substantial person belonging to the Company, I have wrote these circumstances of his shameless and wicked proceedings. Dated the 1st of Moon Shaval in the 3rd year of the *Mogull's* reign which is the 30th of June 1756.

The Nawab's intentions in sending such a letter are obscure, but it is reasonable to suppose that he wished to leave the door open for the return of British trade by excusing his attack upon Calcutta as being directed, not against the Company but against Governor Drake. Whatever the reason, Siraj-ud-daula departed for his capital, Murshidabad, where he arrived on 11 July. Once there, he sent off a message to the Emperor in Delhi, declaring his victory over the British as comparable only with the exploits of Tamerlane!

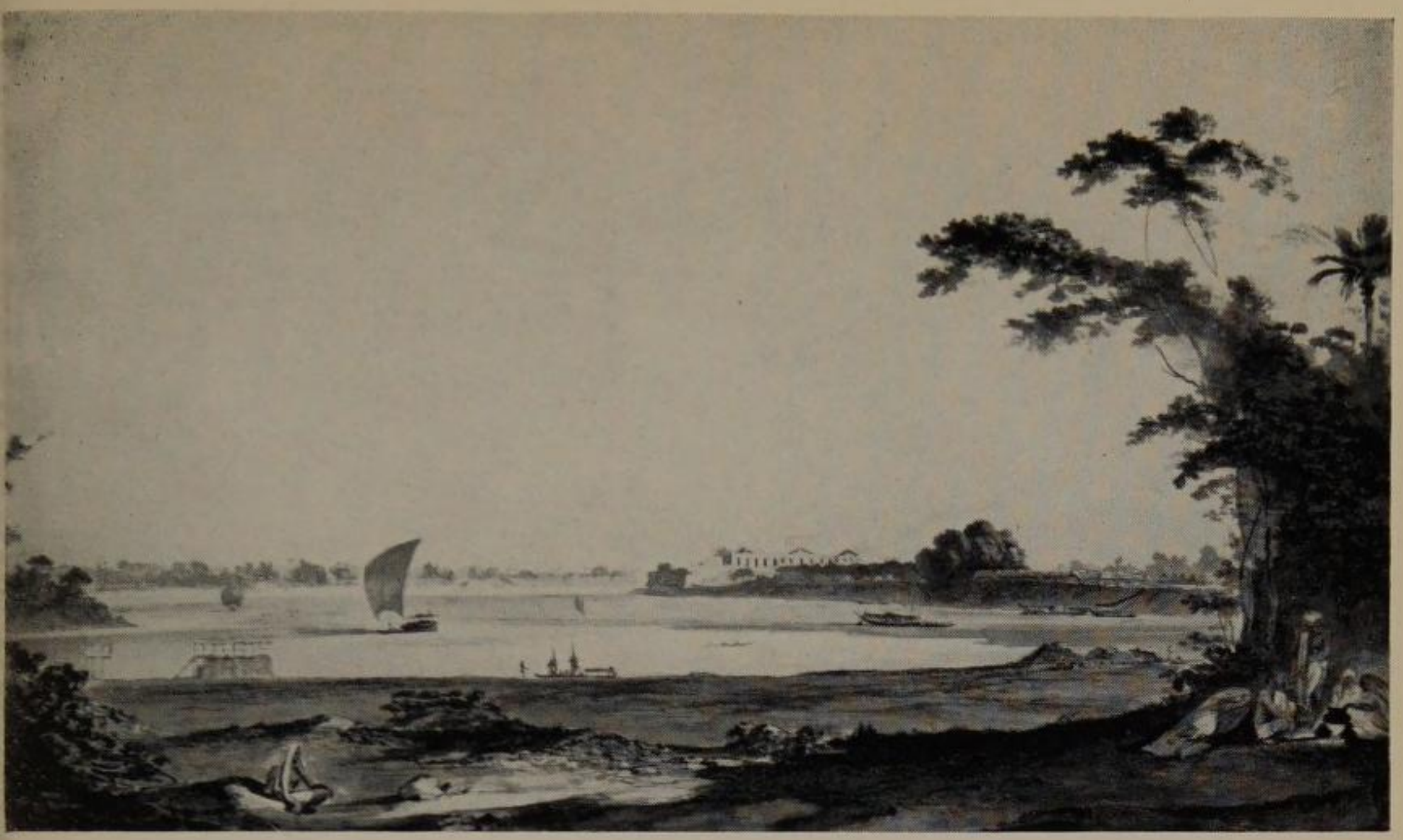
Siraj-ud-daula now ordered the French and the Dutch to purchase from him those goods which had been left behind at Calcutta by the British, but, fearing a quarrel with the British who were expected ultimately to return to Bengal, they refused. This attitude was all very well for those at Chandernagore and Chinsurah, but the Europeans at Kasimbazar were too near the Nawab's hand and could not act so boldly as their down-country colleagues. The Nawab did not press heavily only on the Europeans, for the citizens of Murshidabad also began to feel the effect of his greed. When the news came that Shaukat Jang had again raised the standard of rebellion, all classes saw some positive sign of relief.

While the Nawab had been attacking Calcutta, Shaukat Jang had not remained idle. At Delhi, he had obtained a *firman* appointing him Nawab of Bengal. His ambitions, however, were on a much wider plane. He boasted that after conquering Bengal he would place his creature on the throne in Delhi and then retire to Kandahar and

Khorassan, where 'I intend to take up my residence, as the climate of Bengal does not suit my state of health'. According to Ghulam Husain—who was at his court—Shaukat Jang's health had been ruined by drugs and he was a madman. He certainly behaved like one.

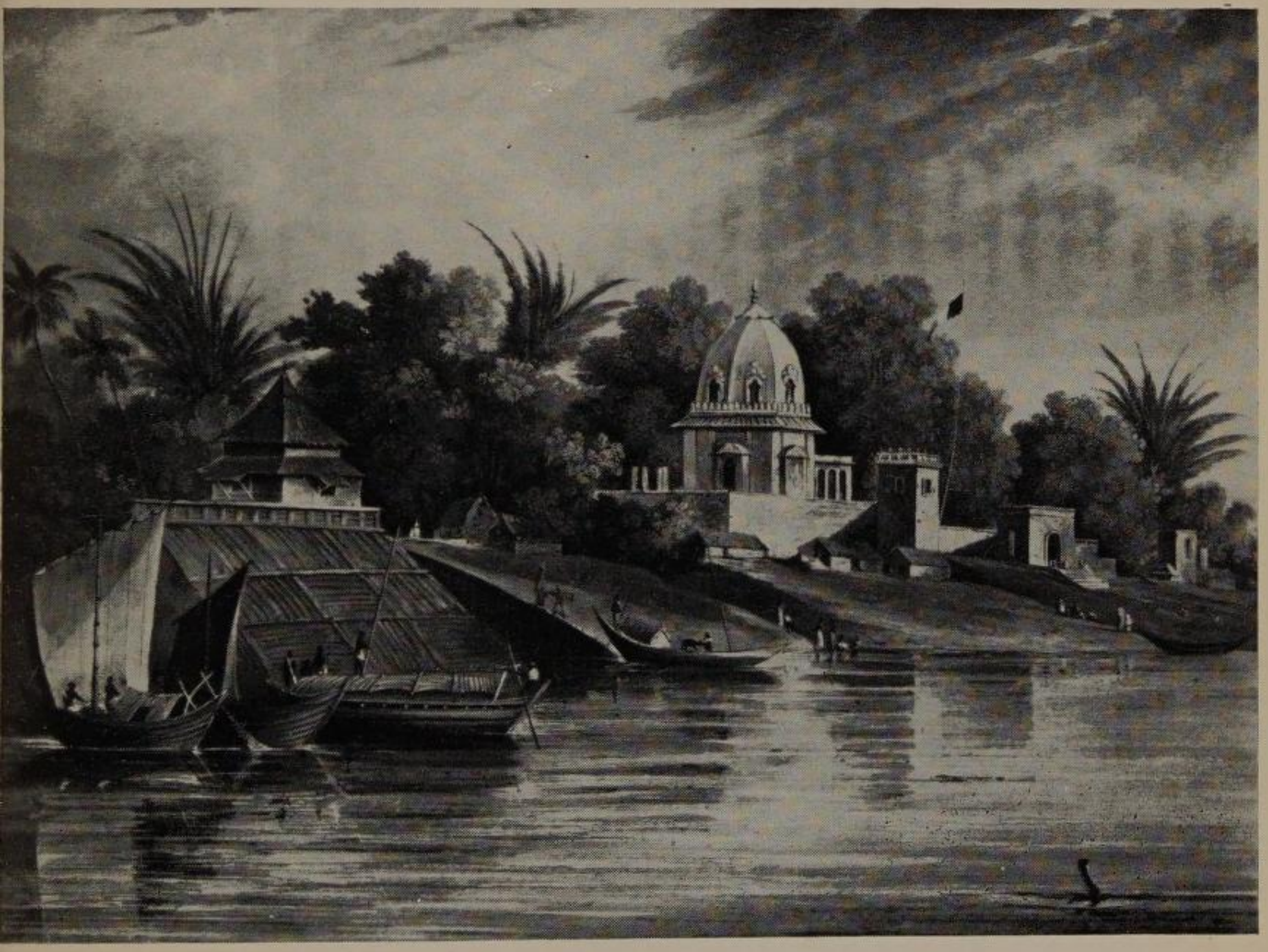
Shaukat Jang's first step towards the realisation of his grandiose ambitions was to antagonise his own generals, most of whom he dismissed with harsh words. One, a Hindu, escaped to Murshidabad after Shaukat had threatened to flog him. From him, Siraj-ud-daula heard of the threat to his own throne and sent one of his courtiers to Shaukat Jang's headquarters at Purneah. Shaukat sent the emissary back to the Nawab with a message to the effect that he proposed to assume the throne and that Siraj-ud-daula's life would be spared if he immediately retired to Dacca. Towards the beginning of October, the Nawab began to collect an army but—like his cousin—he too had antagonised his generals, who refused to march until the banker Jagat Seth (whom he had publicly insulted, and then imprisoned) was set free. Siraj-ud-daula complied, but it did not noticeably improve the attitude of his officers. Fearing assassination, the Nawab called his governor at Patna to his aid.

The campaign against Shaukat Jang was quickly over. The two armies met near Rajmahal and Shaukat Jang was shot dead while charging a body of troops in whose midst he thought he saw his cousin. The Nawab had, in fact, remained behind the army and—fearing that his officers might use the opportunity of battle to murder him—had sent a number of people disguised as himself among the troops. The ruse caught Shaukat Jang instead. With Shaukat's death, his rebel army quickly surrendered and the Nawab returned jubilantly to Murshidabad, confirmed in his belief that he was invincible. There was now no pretender to threaten his power. Those who sought to overthrow him had now no one else to turn to but, when they returned, the English. Siraj-ud-daula's victory over Shaukat Jang was to lead inevitably to the triumph of the British.



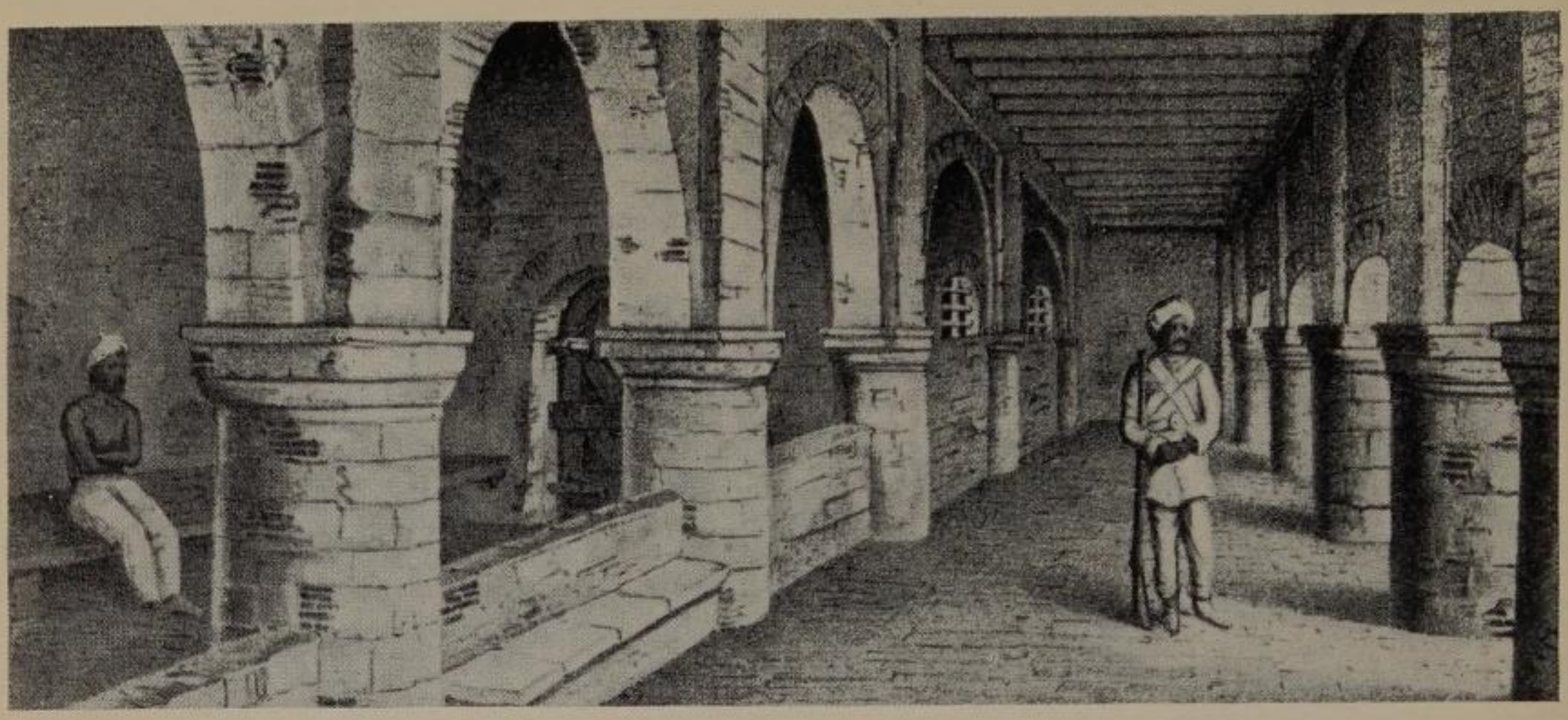
7 *View of the Hugli River at Chandernagore*

From a water-colour by Samuel Davis



8 *Part of the City of Murshidabad, ancient capital of Bengal*

From an engraving by T. Sutherland after a drawing by Lieut.-Col. Forrest



9 *Conjectural view of the 'Black Hole' as seen from the verandah of Fort William, Calcutta*

From Echoes from Old Calcutta, *by H. E. Busteed, 1897*

10 *Clive in Plassey grove*

From a bas-relief by John Tweed

9

The Refugees at Fulta

At the moment, however, it could not have seemed likely to Siraj-ud-daula's enemies that the defeated British would ever return. If they did, it would only be as suppliants of the Nawab.

The little fleet, with Governor Drake aboard the *Dodalay,* arrived at Fulta on 26 June. They were extremely short of supplies and it was not until 20 July that they received some from the Dutch. While they waited for these, the plight of the British was unenviable.

> The want of convenient shelter, as well as the dread of being surprised, obliged them all to sleep on board the vessels, which were so crowded that all lay promiscuously on the decks, without shelter from the rains of the season, and for some time without a change of raiment, for none had brought any store away, and these hardships, inconsiderable as they may seem, were grievous to persons of whom the greatest part had lived many years in the gentle ease of India. Sickness likewise increased their sufferings, for the lower part of Bengal between the two arms of the Ganges is the most unhealthy country in the world, and many died of a malignant fever which infected all the vessels. But instead of alleviating their distresses by that spirit of mutual goodwill which is supposed to prevail amongst companions in misery, everyone turned his mind to invidious discussions of the causes which had produced their misfortune. All seemed to expect a day when they would be restored to Calcutta. The younger men in the Company's service, who had not held any post in the Government, endeavoured to fix every kind of blame on their superiors, whom they wished to see removed from their stations, to which they expected to succeed. At the same time, the Members of Council accused one another, and these examples gave rise to the same spirit of invective amongst those who could derive no benefit from such declamations.

Why the British actually stayed at Fulta instead of proceeding down river and making for Madras, has never adequately been

explained. Holwell maintains that Drake was waiting until he could send an envoy to Madras in order to explain his action in abandoning Calcutta in a favourable light. Drake insists, on the other hand, that they had no provisions for the journey—which was undoubtedly true. Whatever the reason, Drake and such members of Council as were with him, decided to open negotiations with the Nawab. They set about it by first writing to Watts and Collet (then in the French Settlement at Chandernagore) enclosing copies of a letter to be translated and delivered to Manik Chand, Rai Durlabh, Ghulam Husain Khan, Coja Wajid, the Seths, and anyone else with any influence at the Nawab's court. Watts replied that he would not forward the letters nor acknowledge the authority of Governor Drake. Later, however, the letters *were* delivered. The reaction of one of the men who received them, Coja Wajid, was to advise the British that, if they wished to trade on the old terms, they would have to use force.

The action of Watts and Collet in refusing to accept the authority of Governor Drake and the other members of Council, forced the latter to consider their official positions. As there was no longer a Fort William in Calcutta, they could hardly be the Governor and Council of it. Drake and his associates therefore assumed the title of 'The Agents for the Honourable Company's Affairs'. The new Agents had still not been able to send one of their number to Madras in order to explain their actions at Calcutta. Of the first two envoys chosen, one died and the other (Captain Grant, the senior military officer) was needed at Fulta. It was rumoured that either 'Colonel' Manningham or 'Lieutenant-Colonel' Frankland—who, it will be remembered, had been the first to leave Calcutta—was to be sent and, on 10 July, a protest was made to Drake by the junior officers and civilians:

> Honourable Sir—Understanding that Charles Manningham Esq. intends going to Madras in order to represent the unfortunate loss of Calcutta and the situation of the remaining part of the Colony; as that gentleman and Mr Frankland left the place before any retreat was agreed to and afterwards refused joining your Councils when sent for, contrary to both their duty and honour, we are of opinion that either of those gentlemen are most unfit to represent transactions, which (as they absented themselves) they must know very little of, and therefore request that neither they nor

> any member of Council may be permitted to abandon the remains of the Colony and the Company's effects scattered throughout the country.

Drake promised not to send either of these men but, on 13 July, Manningham and a French officer (Lebeaume) were selected to go to Madras to explain the fall of Calcutta, to ask for reinforcements, and above all to persuade the Madras Council not to inform the Directors in England of the loss of the town until it could also be announced that an expedition was on the way to recapture it. Mr Manningham took the opportunity of blackmailing his fellow councillors into accepting a justification of his and Frankland's behaviour at Calcutta. As he would be the first of the survivors to reach Madras, the reputation of all of them rested in his hands. With official absolution now secured, Manningham and Lebeaume left on board the *Syren*. They arrived at Vizagapatam on 12 August, and Lebeaume, carrying a letter from Drake, left for Madras overland the next day.

On 13 July, the Council at Madras had received first news of the outbreak of war in Bengal and, the following day, it was decided to send Major Kilpatrick and 200 soldiers to reinforce the Company's troops at Calcutta. Kilpatrick and his men left on the 21st. All this time the Council at Madras was not aware of the true state of events in Bengal, and, in fact, the news that Calcutta had fallen on 20 June was not received in Madras until 16 August.

Kilpatrick and his little force arrived at Fulta on the 30th or 31st of July. Watts, Collet, Pearkes, and Holwell also arrived in Fulta between then and 13 August but, by that time, Kilpatrick's men had been considerably reduced by sickness. When he arrived at Fulta on 12 August, Holwell protested vigorously against the retention of authority by Drake and other members of Council, but he won no support and was finally persuaded to attend the meetings. After this the quarrelling appears to have stopped and Governor Drake was, in effect, reinstated. He was even greeted with a salute of guns when he dined on board one of the other ships. In order to preserve the secrecy of their plans for retaking Calcutta, the Council formed a committee consisting of Drake, Holwell, Watts and Kilpatrick, which held its first meeting on board the schooner *Phoenix* on 22 August. An attempt had already been made to divert the Nawab by means of a letter from Kilpatrick which assured him that the

British bore him no malice and which asked him for supplies. Kilpatrick, on advice received from the ubiquitous Omichand, also wrote to Manik Chand, Coja Wajid, Rai Durlabh, and Jagat Seth. The letter to the Nawab was sent for delivery to a young man named Warren Hastings, who had remained behind at Kasimbazar. He did not, however, deliver the letter, and Omichand only delivered one of the other letters, that to Manik Chand. It seemed that they might not be necessary because there were signs of a rebellion against Siraj-ud-daula. The letter to Manik Chand produced an order that the local bazaars should sell provisions to the English though, on 31 August, there had been news that Manik Chand was preparing to occupy Budge Budge and send fire-boats down the river to burn the British ships. On 17 September, Hastings informed the Council that war between Shaukat Jang and the Nawab was sure to break out.

The information reaching Fulta from Murshidabad was confused and after 9 or 10 October when Hastings was forced to leave Kasimbazar, no accurate details of what was going on could be obtained. On 13 October, the Council wrote to Madras that they were again finding it difficult to get supplies and where were the reinforcements they had asked for? The reply they had all been waiting for arrived on the sloop *Kingfisher*, which arrived at Hugli on 23 October. Admiral Watson and Colonel Clive were leaving Madras with a strong body of troops. Overjoyed at this news, the British hoisted the flag, had a copy of the Company's patent from the Emperor translated into Persian, and bribed a local official at Hugli to affix the Imperial Seal to it.

Such news as came from Murshidabad was, however, not so good. A letter from Omichand was received on 27 October, informing the Council of the defeat and death of Shaukat Jang. Though the Nawab now seemed in a favourable mood, his governor at Calcutta —Manik Chand—was not, for he had heard of the enthusiasm with which the British had greeted their recent news from Madras, although he did not know what precisely the news was. Manik Chand collected troops at Budge Budge and it looked as if an attack was imminent. Nothing, however, happened. But Manik Chand very soon learned (for his spies were extremely well informed) of the forthcoming arrival of a British squadron at Fulta on 15 December. The day before, Manik Chand ordered that the Governor of Hugli should reoccupy the fort at Tanna while he himself marched

to Budge Budge and collected ships which could be sunk in the narrows at Tanna and used to block the river and prevent the British vessels from moving upstream. On hearing this news, the native inhabitants of Calcutta gathered together their loot and left for Hugli, where their arrival frightened the people into fleeing further inland.

The first British ship to arrive at Fulta was the *Protector,* carrying the news that Watson had left Madras two days ahead of the *Protector*. Watson, on board the *Kent*, arrived the same day and was soon joined by the *Tyger, Salisbury, Bridgewater*, and *Walpole,* the last ship carrying instructions from the Court of Directors of the East India Company in London to the effect that a Select Secret Committee should be appointed for 'managing all matters regarding the Company's possessions, rights and privileges in these provinces'. The members of this committee were to be Drake, Watts, Becher, and Manningham. As the latter was in Madras, Holwell was brought in as a substitute. Watson and Clive were asked to join in the meetings of the committee and it was, in fact, this committee which later became the fomenter of those revolutions in Bengal whose results were to lead to the establishment of British dominion over the whole of India.

THE ROAD
TO
PLASSEY

10

Preparations in Madras

On 17 August, Mr Pigot, the East India Company's governor in Madras, placed before his Council the letters which he had received the previous day from Watts and Collet informing him of the fall of Calcutta. When the news of the loss of Kasimbazar had earlier reached Madras, it had been decided to send one ship, the *Bridgewater,* to Bengal with 150 men, stores, and money. The prospect which faced the Madras Council was not the loss of merely one trading station, but of them all. Admiral Watson, the officer commanding naval forces at Madras, was now consulted. His advice was to send only a small force to re-take Calcutta and to delay any large-scale expedition until the end of September, when the rains would have stopped and the roads would once again be passable. 'If the ships were to go now,' he said, 'one third of the men would fall sick before there would be an opportunity of their doing any service.' There was also the possibility, rumours of which were continually being received, of the outbreak of war in Europe between Britain and France. Watson had already warned the Council of the danger of removing troops from Madras in case of a French attack.

> Is it not very probable, if the French squadron should arrive here, which you have reason to expect, that they having intelligence where I am gone to, will, under the presumption of the largest Ships not being able to get higher than Ballasor Road, come there in search of me? How then should I be able to defend His Majesty's Ships without men? Would they not become an easy capture to the French and thereby contribute to the Ruin of your Affairs instead of being of any service?

The Council, which had now been joined by Robert Clive, after a good deal of argument

> . . . unanimously resolved that Admiral Watson be desired to send

> the Fifty and Twenty Gun Ships down to Bengal, with about 240 Military, with the intent to retake Calcutta only, without attempting anything more untill join'd by further succours, and that all necessary preparations be made, as expeditiously as possible, to send all the forces that can be spared from hence with the remainder of the squadron, if in the interim the expected Advices from Europe should not make it necessary to alter the Measures.

As still no news had been received by 21 September of the outbreak of war, the Council decided that the expedition to Bengal must go forward and it was also decided that Colonel Clive be appointed to the command, with the assistance of two members of the Madras Council, Smith and Walsh. Clive's appointment was viewed with great disfavour by Colonel Aldercron. Clive was a Company's officer—that is to say, appointed by the Company to command the Company's own army. Aldercron was a King's officer in charge of a regiment of British troops on loan to the Company by the British government. Holders of the King's Commission were inclined to despise Company officers as amateurs without any professional standing. Aldercron went so far as to refuse to allow his regiment to embark. 'Surely, gentlemen,' he wrote to the Council, 'you are not so unreasonable as to expect that I will send away any part of His Majesty's train [artillery] or regiment (who are so immediately under my direction) and to leave to you the nomination.' He further demanded that the artillery and stores which had been embarked should now be unloaded, and refused to leave the stores on board for the use of the Company's forces. After Manningham had arrived on 29 September, and when his news had been discussed, Admiral Watson was appointed to command the expedition by sea and Clive by land. Despite Clive's protests, the Council decided that the two civilian deputies they had delegated to assist Clive would infringe the position of the Council of Fort William, and they were dropped. Clive was, however, given independent authority to act in military matters as he thought fit. This was to be the cause of much friction between Clive and the Council in Bengal.

On 11 October Clive received his commission as Commander-in-Chief and, on that day, he wrote to 'The Honourable Gentlemen of the Secret Committee, London':

> Honble Gentlemen—from many Hands you will hear of the Capture of Calcutta by the Moors & the Chain of Misfortunes & Losses

which have happened to the Company in particular & to the Nation in General. Every Breast here seems filled with Grief, Horror & Resentment, indeed it is too sad a Tale to unfold & I must beg leave to refer you to the General Letters, Consultations and Committees which will give you a full account of this Catastrophe.

Upon the Melancholy Occasion the Govr & Council thought proper to summons me to this Place; as soon as an Expedition was resolv'd upon I offer'd my Service which at last was accepted & I am now upon the point of embarking on board His Majestys Squadron with a fine Body of Europeans full of spirit & Resentment for the Insults & Barbarities inflicted on so many British Subjects.

I flatter myself that this Expedition will not end with the retaking of Calcutta only: & that the Company's Estate in these parts will be settled in a Better & more lasting Condition than ever.

There is less Reason to apprehend a Check from the Nabob's Forces than from the Nature of the Climate & Country. The news of a War may likewise interfere with the Success of this Expedition; however, should that happen, & Hostilities be committed in India, I hope we shall be able to dispossess the French of Charnagore & leave Calcutta in a state of Defence.

I have a true sense of my Duty to my Country & the Company & I beg leave to assure you that nothing shall be wanting on my part to answer the Ends of an undertaking on which so much Depends. Success on this Occasion will fill the Measure of my Joy; as it will fix me in the Esteem of those to whom I have the Honour to subscribe myself with Great Respect.

Their most obliged & humble Servant

R. Clive.

Clive was obviously aware of the difficulties of the campaign, as well as of the opportunities it presented, for he wrote to his father: 'This Expedition if attended with success, may enable me to do great things. It is by far the grandest of my undertakings. I go with great forces and great authority.'

These 'great forces' were now almost ready to depart. The naval squadron consisted of five of His Majesty's ships, Watson's flagship, the *Kent* of sixty-four guns, the *Cumberland,* commanded by Admiral Pocock, of seventy guns, the *Tyger,* sixty guns, the *Salisbury* of fifty, and the *Bridgewater* of twenty. There was also a fireship, appropriately named the *Blaze*. These were to act as escort for the transports which totalled six in number. There were provisions and

water for six weeks. The troops, when they had embarked, numbered 528 military, 109 artillerymen, 940 sepoys or native troops, and 160 lascars, a word then used to describe tent-pitchers, coolies, ammunition carriers, and, in general, camp followers. Colonel Aldercron had finally agreed—though with great reluctance—to permit some of his men to serve as marines on board the fleet. These, amounting to three companies, were commanded by Captain Archibald Grant, with Captain Weller and Captain Eyre Coote.

On 13 October, Clive was given his instructions. He was to assist the Select Committee in Bengal with advice, keep them from quarrelling, and 'pursue such measures as you shall judge most conducive to the Company's benefit'. There was still a possibility of war with France and Clive was told that it might be necessary to recall him for the defence of Madras. Clive, as we have seen in his letter to London, hoped that he would be able to seize Chandernagore should hostilities with France break out.

Despite their apprehensions, the Council at Madras (unlike their colleagues of Fort William) were prepared to act with forethought, foresight, and decision. Not only were they willing to take the risk of weakening their own resistance to a possible French attack, but they were determined that the expedition to Bengal should produce valuable results.

> The mere retaking of Calcutta [they wrote to the Select Committee in Bengal] should we think by no means be the end of the undertaking; not only their [the Company's] Settlements and Factories should be restored, but all their privileges established in their full extent granted by the Great Mogul, and ample reparation made of them for the loss they have lately sustained; otherwise we are of opinion it would have been better nothing had been attempted, than to have added the heavy charge of this armament to their former loss, without securing their colonies and trade from future insults and exactions.

They were to be amply rewarded for their foresight and courage.

II

The Defeat of the Nawab

On 16 October 1756, the fleet sailed from Madras. The weather was bad and, in the first twelve days, the ships were blown south as far as Ceylon. The north-west monsoon had hit the Bay of Bengal and it was necessary to beat across the Bay to the coast of Tenasserim, in present-day Burma, before making north to the mouth of the Hugli. The waves in the Bay were running high and the ships were taking a heavy beating. On the night of 13 November, one of the ships (the *Salisbury*) sprang a leak 'which kept all her pumps going to free her, and after making the signal of distress, the carpenters of the *Kent* and other ships were sent on board, who found out the leak and in some measure stopped it, so that she was able to proceed on the voyage under an easy sail upon her foremast, as the leak was discovered to be in the wooden ends forwards'.

The rations on board, which had been intended for a six-week voyage, were now reduced, each man receiving a half allowance of provisions and a two-thirds allowance of water. Scurvy appeared, particularly amongst the sailors. It was not until 5 December that Watson anchored off the mouth of the Hugli. His men were in a sorry state. Supplies of rice for the Indian soldiers had failed, and 'there was nothing to serve out to them but beef and pork'—meats ritually unclean to Hindus—'but though some did submit to this defilement, yet many preferred a languishing death by famine to life polluted beyond recovery'.

The mouth of the Hugli, then uncharted and almost unknown to European pilots, was dangerous with shoals and it was not until 8 December that, with the spring tides, the fleet was actually able to enter the river. The Admiral arrived at Fulta on the 15th.

Clive and Watson were co-opted on to the Secret Committee which, as we know, had been set up on instructions from the Court

of Directors in London. Neither Watson nor Clive was prepared to give up any of his authority. Clive, in order to demonstrate his feelings, immediately took it upon himself to write a letter to Manik Chand, the governor of Calcutta:

> Upon my arrival in these parts from Madras I was informed that you had shown a great friendship and regard for the English Company, for which I write to return you thanks. I doubt not but as you have hitherto professed a desire to serve the Company, you will at this time, when their affairs must require it, retain the same disposition in their favour.

Manik Chand replied courteously and sent a draft of a letter which he advised Clive to write to the Nawab. But the situation was no longer one in which a submissive letter could be sent. The British were back in force with the specific aim of forcing the Nawab to rectify the wrongs he had committed against them. Clive replied:

> I have received your letter with the form enclosed for a letter to the Nabob. I am very sensible of your friendship and kind intentions in sending me the letter, which I have read, but am sorry that I cannot, consistently with my duty to the Company or their honour, accept of your advice in writing to the Nabob a letter couched in such a style, which, however proper it might have been before the taking of Calcutta, would but ill suit with the present time, when we are come to demand satisfaction for the injuries done us by the Nabob, not to entreat his favour, and with a force which we think sufficient to vindicate our claims.

In a few days both Clive and Watson decided to write directly to the Nawab. Watson's letter was anything but submissive:

> As you must be sensible of the benefit of having the English settled in your country, I doubt not you will consent to make them a reasonable satisfaction for the losses and injury they have suffered, and by that means put an amicable end to the trouble, and secure the friendship of my king, who is a lover of peace, and delights in acts of equity. What can I say more?'

The Nawab appreciated neither the threatening tone nor the suggestion that it was to his benefit to have the British trading in his country. Indeed, he began to assemble an army at Murshidabad, and Manik Chand began to strengthen the defences of Fort William and other places on the river. Clive, who had fallen victim to an

attack of malaria (Fulta was surrounded by swamps), now proposed to move. On 23 December he wrote to Major Kilpatrick.

> The time now draws near for the quitting of Fulta, previous to which many necessary steps are to be taken, Boats, Sloops, etcetera should be in readiness for the Embarkation of all our Military, Lascars and Seapoys, as likewise all our Stores, Provision etcetera. I think it would be a gaining of time, if all the Baggage, Stores, etc. were embarked immediately on large Boats, excepting what the Service on Shore absolutely requires. I would have all our Military and Seapoys supplied with 36 Rounds per Man, and the rest of the Ammunition disposed of in such a manner as to be at hand when called for, I would have the 2.6 pounders & 2.3 pounders well supplyed with Ammunition and in readiness to Land at a Moments warning, for I take it for granted, we shall march from Budjee Budjee to Calcutta by Land, it would save us the Trouble of Embarking if we could do the same from Fulta, please to speak to the Governor to give Orders that the Vessel which has the 100,000 Musket Cartridges on Board accompany the Squadron . . . there are many other things which do not occur to me, which may fall within your Knowledge, in short I leave everything to your Prudence and Discretion for the present; dispose of the Troops in such a manner that they may be in readiness to March overland to Calcutta, and, if necessary, to attack Budjee Budjee, Tana Fort, etcetera.

Two days later the fleet moved up river, 'but the sepoys marched overland bearing the ships in view, and Captain Barker following in boats with 80 of the train and two field pieces properly completed'. In sending the native soldiers by land, Clive had been overruled. The intention was that the ships should bombard the fort at Budge Budge, which stood on the river, while Clive took the road north to Calcutta in order to ambush the garrison as it retreated. The Council of War insisted that the troops should go by land, though Clive wished to convey them to Budge Budge in the ships. On 28 December, Clive left for Mayapur with two field pieces and some 500 men. The going was heavy, for the native guides 'in order to prevent discovery, led the troops at a distance from the river, through a part of the country, which was uninhabited indeed, but full of swamps, and continually intersected by deep rivulets, which rendered the draught and transportation of the three carriages so tedious and laborious that the troops did not arrive until an hour after sunrise at the place of ambuscade'.

The position occupied by Clive and his men was surrounded with bushes and they could not see the fort at all, and only the tops of the masts of the British ships. Clive, too, was completely without trustworthy news of the enemy, and did not know that a force under Manik Chand was camped only two miles away from him. After he had deployed his little force, Clive was left with 260 Europeans. He later gave an account of what followed on the morning of the 29th.

> At ten, Monichaund, the Governor of Calcutta, attacked us with between two and three thousand horse and foot, and was worsted. The people of the country raise fabulous reports about the killed and wounded; but there is reason to believe, from the smartness of the fire while it lasted, and the nearness of the enemy, some of which were within twenty yards, 150 might be killed and wounded and with them four of the principal *jemidars* and an elephant.
>
> Monichaund himself received a shot in his turban. Our two field pieces were of little or no service to us, having neither tubes nor port-fires, and wrong carriages sent with them from Fort St. David; indeed we still labour under every disadvantage in the world.

On the river, the British ships had arrived in front of the fort at Budge Budge at about 8 a.m. The first shots were fired by the defenders, a fact which was to be used as justification for subsequent British actions. After the guns of the fort had been put out of action, marines were landed who—on hearing that Clive had been attacked—left the attack on the fort and went to his assistance.

After the clash with Manik Chand, Clive went on board the flagship to consult with Watson, and it was decided that, because Clive was fatigued, the attack on the fort should be postponed until the next morning. This was much to the annoyance of Captain Coote. He was even more annoyed when

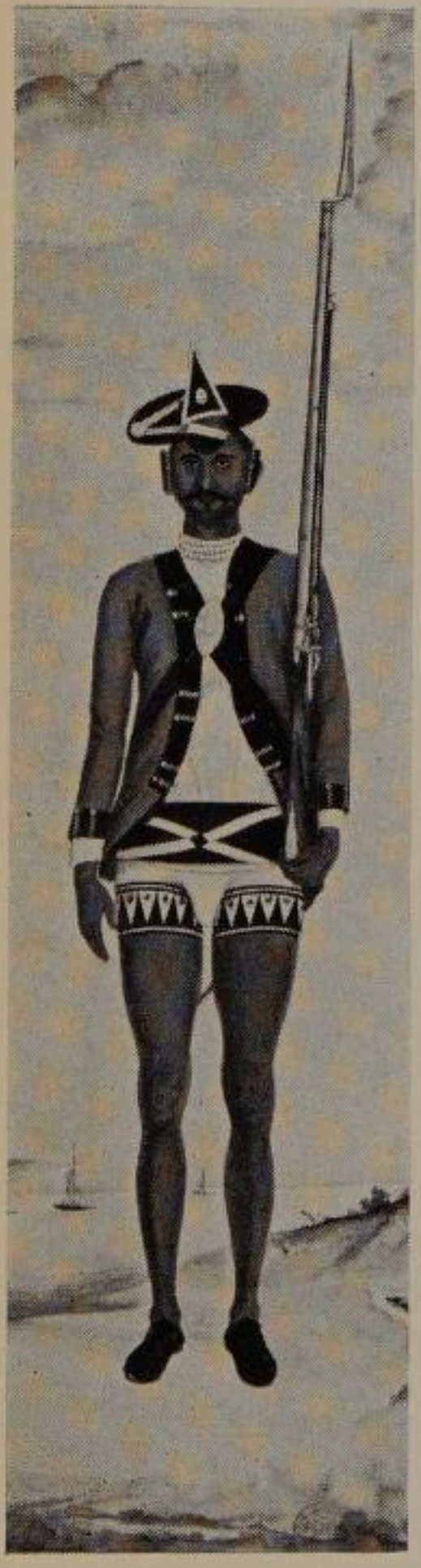
> one Strahan, a common sailor belonging to the *Kent*, having been just served with a quantity of grog [arrack mixed with water] had his spirits too much elated to think of taking any rest; he therefore strayed by himself towards the fort, and imperceptibly got under the walls; being advanced thus far without interruption, he took it into his head to scale at a breach that had been made by the cannon of the ships; and having luckily gotten upon the bastion, he there discovered several Moor-men sitting on the platform, at whom he flourished his cutlass, and fired his pistol, and then, after having given three loud huzzas, cried out, 'the place is mine'.

11 *Vice-Admiral Watson*

From an engraving by E. Fisher after the portrait by Thomas Hudson

12 *Sepoy making bread*

From a water-colour drawing by a native artist



13 (*left*) *Sepoy of the Bengal infantry*

From a water-colour drawing by a native artist

14 (*right*) *Sepoys of the Bengal Army*

From an engraving after a drawing by F. B. Solvyns

Strahan was soon followed by some of his comrades—and the fort was taken. The losses, four wounded. Coote recorded in his journal 'Thus the place was taken without the least honour to anyone'!

The following day the fort was demolished and the troops re-embarked. The sepoys, however, continued their march by land. On 1 January, the fleet anchored off Tanna fort. A new mud fort had been erected on the opposite bank, but both were found abandoned. Inside, the British found 'about 40 guns, some 24 pounders, and all mounted on good carriages, most of them the Company's'.

'In the night,' wrote Watson, 'I sent the boats manned and armed up the river, to set fire to a ship and some vessels that lay under a fort, which was executed without opposition. That was a necessary piece of service, as I heard they were filled with combustibles in order to be set on fire when the ebb made, to burn our ships'.

At 5 o'clock the next morning, the Company's troops were landed and, being joined by the sepoys, set off for Calcutta. Watson moved up river with the *Kent* and the *Tyger*; a few rounds were fired at them, but as they approached the gun emplacements, the artillerymen ran off.

> At 10 a.m. the ships coming abreast of Fort William (by the Moors called Alinagor) were fired upon pretty wildly as they lay becalmed, sheering around in the eddies of the tide; but soon, after coming to an anchor close in with the western line of guns on the riverside, they drove the enemy from her batteries, who fled through the eastern gate before the military or *seapoys* could come up with them; in this action three of the King's soldiers and six sailors were killed.

As the enemy departed, some of the native inhabitants ran up a British flag on a tree. The Admiral then put ashore a naval officer, Captain King, and a detachment of troops under Eyre Coote, to take possession of the fort. Coote's orders were to hold the fort and not to give it up to anyone. When the sepoys arrived, they were prevented from entering and Clive, on 'coming near the fort myself I was informed that there were orders that none of the Company's officers or troops should have entrance. This, I own, enraged me to such a degree that I was resolved to enter if possible, which I did'. When Clive demanded that Coote give up the fort, Coote pleaded orders and asked permission to inform the Admiral. On hearing of this, the Admiral wrote Clive a threatening letter. Clive was also

informed, verbally, that if he did not quit the fort he 'should be fired out'. Clive was not the sort of character to be intimidated by anyone or anything and he replied that he could not answer for the consequences, but that he would not abandon the fort. The affair was finally settled through an intermediary, Captain Latham. He and Clive:

> talked the affair over with calmness, and soon settled a dispute which otherwise might have ended greatly to the prejudice of the public cause. The Colonel's messages to Mr. Watson implied, that if the Admiral would come on shore and command in person, he should have no manner of objection to it: And on Admiral Watson's going on shore, the next day, the Colonel delivered the keys of the garrison into his hands, and then the Admiral delivered them to the late governor, Mr. Drake, and his Council. And these gentlemen, persuaded by Colonel Clive of the necessity of the step, immediately published a declaration of war against the Nabob, in the name of the East India Company, as did Admiral Watson in that of the king, his master.

Drake and the other members of the Select Committee disliked Clive because of the authority given to him by the Madras Council, implying—and justifiably—a distrust of their own competence. Clive, on his part, was not particularly concerned with their private revenge. He had found that 'the loss of private property and the means of recovering it, seemed to be the only object which takes up the attention of the Bengal gentlemen'. Clive was concerned only with settling the score against the Nawab and with gaining compensation for the losses of the Company. All along, therefore, the Select Committee sought to create friction between Watson and Clive, in the hope of advantage to themselves. Watson, a brave though somewhat pompous man, very conscious of his rank in the Royal Navy, shared that contempt of the Company's soldiers which was held by all the King's officers. It made Clive's task not only a military one, but a diplomatic one. Clive was not a person to suffer fools, or to permit other interests to inhibit his own. He had his orders and his ambitions—as they coincided, he would not allow them to be ignored. Nevertheless, he was almost continually in conflict with the members of the Bengal Select Committee and they, successfully, attempted to impede him in his task.

The Calcutta which the British (quarrelling amongst themselves

for the honours of war) had captured, was almost completely in ruins. Much of the fort was severely damaged and many of the houses that surrounded it had been burned to the ground. One of the defence walls, the eastern curtain, had been demolished to make way for the Nawab's mosque. The houses that had survived had been gutted and the furniture, doors, and windows used for firewood. The native town was in an even worse state, for what the British had not burned, the Nawab had. What survived the fire had been plundered. Nevertheless, after the miseries of Fulta, the Europeans were more than happy to be back and, by January 1757, the White Town was beginning to look reasonably prosperous in spite of the fact that everybody was supposed to be so short of money that a request had to be made to the Court of Directors in London to suspend the laws against debtors.

While the happy work of reconstruction was going on, Clive and Watson were preparing to carry on the campaign against the Nawab. It was decided that the town of Hugli—which, if used by the Nawab's forces, would directly threaten Calcutta—should be attacked and that the large stores of rice and grain there should be destroyed before the Nawab could reach them. On 4 January, therefore, 170 of the King's troops, a company of grenadiers and 300 sepoys, commanded by Major Kilpatrick, were embarked upon the *Bridgewater*, *Kingfisher*, and *Thunder*. Unfortunately, the next day, the *Bridgewater*, 'by not having a good pilot, stuck on a sandbank where he lay forty-eight hours in great danger, but got off without receiving much damage, and by the assistance of a Dutch pilot . . . he proceeded agreeable to his orders'. The Dutch pilot had, in fact, been taken off his own ship by force, as the Dutch refused to help voluntarily.

On 9 January, a body of troops was landed below the fort at Hugli and the ships began to bombard the town's defences. The fort was later occupied and the garrison—though it numbered about 2,000 men—ran away. From then until 18 January, the troops spent their time looting native houses. On the 12th, Eyre Coote was sent with fifty soldiers and 100 sepoys to burn a granary up river. With him were sailors in boats from the men-at-war, whose job it was to search the creeks for enemy ships. Coote burnt the granary but met a party of the enemy on his way back and had to fight his way over a mile to the river. On the 19th, after destroying the fortifications at

Hugli, the troops were re-embarked and returned to Calcutta. The sepoys, however, were left behind. It had also been decided to send a force against the town of Dacca, for, as Clive wrote, 'the surprise of this place may be of great consequence to the Company's affairs'. The expedition was abandoned when news came that the Nawab, after assembling a large army, had arrived at a place slightly up river from Hugli on the same day as the European troops had been withdrawn to return to Calcutta.

Back at Fort William, Clive had been attempting to put the defences into some sort of order. But, as he wrote, he 'could not make it more than barely tenable for, to all its former defects when taken from us, the Moors have broken down part of the Curtain'. Nevertheless he was still able to report that 'Fort William can never be taken by the Moors except by Cowardice', a reminder perhaps to Governor Drake and his colleagues that even good fortifications need good men to hold them. But whatever the state of Fort William, Clive was determined to prevent a direct attack upon it. This was not because of any fear of the Nawab's army, but because of doubts about the French; at the time of the attack on Hugli, news had been received of the outbreak of war in May 1756 between France and England. It was possible therefore that the French in Bengal might support the Nawab. At Chandernagore they had some 300 Europeans and a train of artillery which, together with the numbers of the Nawab's men, would provide a formidable combination against Clive's tiny force.

In Madras, Stringer Lawrence (the founder of the Indian Army) and Clive had discovered that well-trained native troops commanded by British officers could defeat the irregular cavalry and foot of the local rulers. Why, then, should Clive not increase his force in Bengal by the same method? This he did by recruiting from amongst those mercenaries of many races and religions who had followed the Muslim conquerors into Bengal. Having enlisted two or three hundred of these men, Clive formed them into the First Regiment of the Bengal Native Infantry. Even with these new additions, Clive's force was still too small. He therefore wrote to Admiral Watson:

> You are very sensible, Sir, that with sickness and other accidents how far this force falls short of what was intended to act offensively against the Nabob of Bengal; indeed at present nothing but our

> strong situation can enable us to act against him at all. I must therefore request a favour of you, Sir, to land the King's Forces and to lay your commands on the officer who commands them to put himself under my orders; assuring you at the same time that whenever you think it for the good of the service to recall them, upon signification thereof to me by letter, they shall be returned.

To which the Admiral replied:

> I have received your favour of yesterday's date, enclosing the return of your little army and desiring the King's Forces may be sent to join you. I cannot help thinking the number of your own troops are too few even to act defensively against the Nabob, therefore I have given orders to the captains of the several ships to discharge their troops, and have directed Captain Weller to join you, and put himself under your command until further order.

Clive was pleased, but, as he wrote to Pigot of the King's troops at Madras, 'It had been better for the service they had never come and I had the like number of Company's in their room'.

Though relations between Clive and Watson now seemed reasonably cordial, the same could not be said for those between Clive and the Select Committee. The Committee instructed Clive to give up his independent powers and put himself under their control and carry out *their* plans. Also, he was not to leave Bengal with his troops without their permission. Clive's reply was that, as long as his orders coincided with theirs, there would be no difficulties. The Committee wanted the defeat of the Nawab and the repayment from his treasury of their personal losses. Clive, however, was willing to achieve his ends—which were to expand and consolidate the *Company's* affairs—by a treaty with the Nawab if that were possible. War, with the tiny forces at his disposal, was too hazardous.

Siraj-ud-daula, who had started from Murshidabad as soon as he heard of the attack on Hugli, now went through the pretence of negotiation and asked the French and the Dutch to act as intermediaries. His intention was to gain time, because his army was mutinous. Apparently, though there is no proof of this, he ordered the Seths to write to Clive on 14 January, complaining against the British action at Hugli and in particular against the plundering. On the 17th, this complaint was followed by a letter from Coja Wajid, suggesting that the French should act as middlemen in negotiations between the Nawab and the British. To this, Clive

replied with a thinly veiled threat, reminding Coja Wajid of the losses he had already suffered by the looting of his property at Hugli. Clive also enclosed a copy of the British demands and stated that he was prepared to accept mediation by Coja Wajid and the Seths.

On 21 January, the same day as this letter was sent, two Frenchmen arrived in Calcutta who had been sent by the chief of the French in Bengal, M. Renault. They explained that they were not empowered to negotiate on behalf of the Nawab, but were prepared to convey any proposals the Select Committee cared to make. The Frenchmen were informed that these had already been sent to Coja Wajid but they were also informed, verbally, that the proposals covered four points:

(a) the British should receive complete reparation for all their losses,
(b) the Company should be allowed the full exercise of all its privileges in Bengal,
(c) the British should have the right to fortify their settlements as they pleased, and
(d) the Company should have a Mint at Calcutta.

The two Frenchmen departed to consult with Coja Wajid, and returned a few days later with a message from him that, in his own opinion, the Nawab might grant the first three British proposals but had no power to grant permission to coin money. The British remained firm, and the Frenchmen finally returned to Chandernagore.

In the meantime, Admiral Watson had received a letter from the Nawab which was merely polite and vague, while Clive received a message from the Nawab's 'private minister' asking that the British present their proposals direct to the Nawab. This last letter convinced Clive that the Nawab was really prepared to negotiate. At the same time, however, the Nawab had written angrily to M. Renault, complaining that the British had refused the French attempt to mediate, and declaring that he would make no terms with them.

On 30 January, the Nawab's army began to cross the river about ten miles from Hugli. The same day, the Nawab wrote to M. Renault again, asking for French aid 'to punish this faithless people [the British] and chase them from this country'. In return he promised to 'abolish for ever the annual imposts on your commerce and

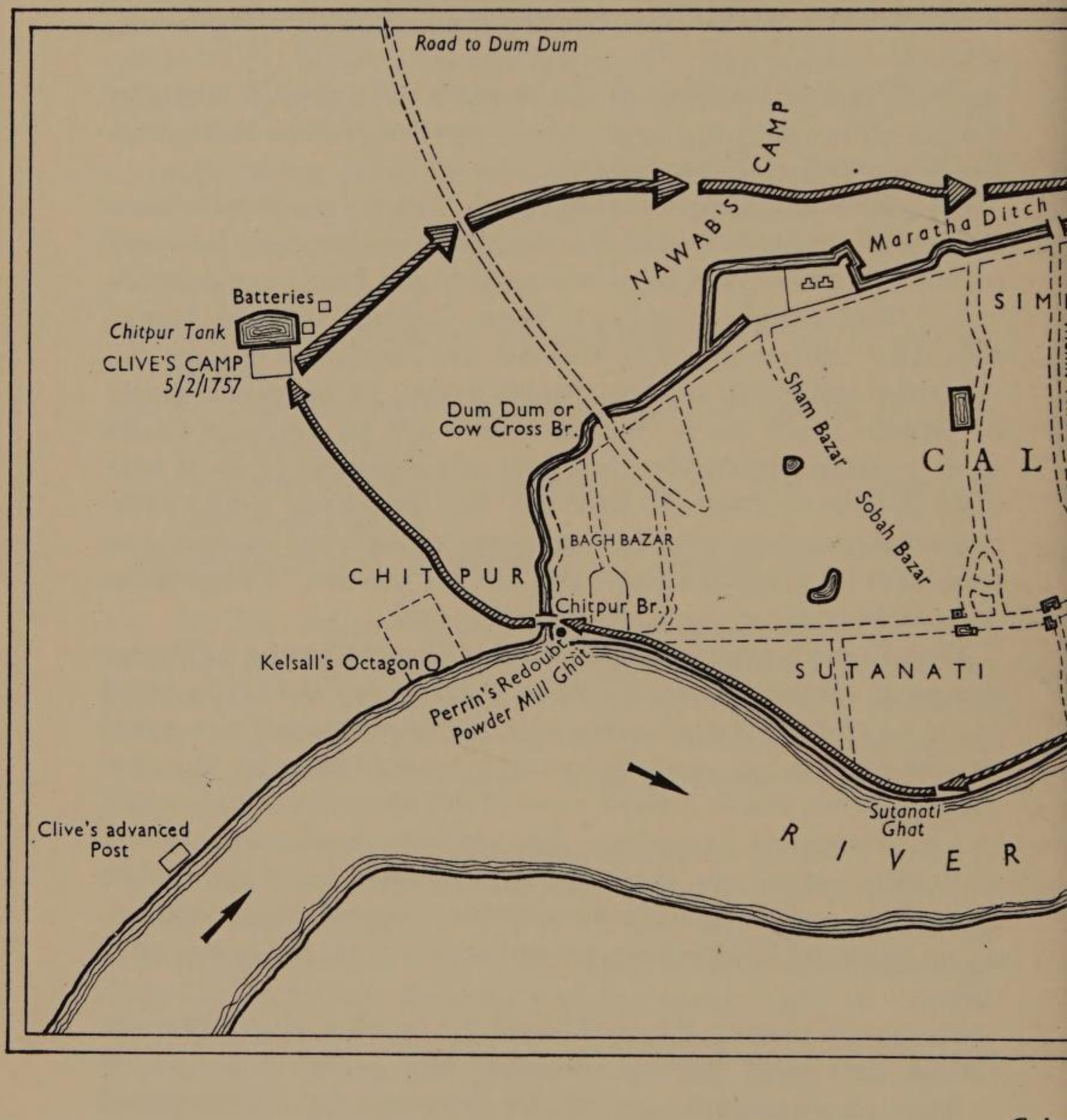
I give you the right to establish a Mint at Chandernagore. I will demand a *firman* for this from the Light of the Presence, the greatest and purest, the Emperor of Delhi, and will send it to you. Until the arrival of the *firman* I will give you a *parwana,* with my seal, so that you may exercise these two privileges with perfect tranquillity of mind.'

The French did not accept the Nawab's offer, though why they did not—thus losing an opportunity to destroy, perhaps finally, their British competitors—is not clear.

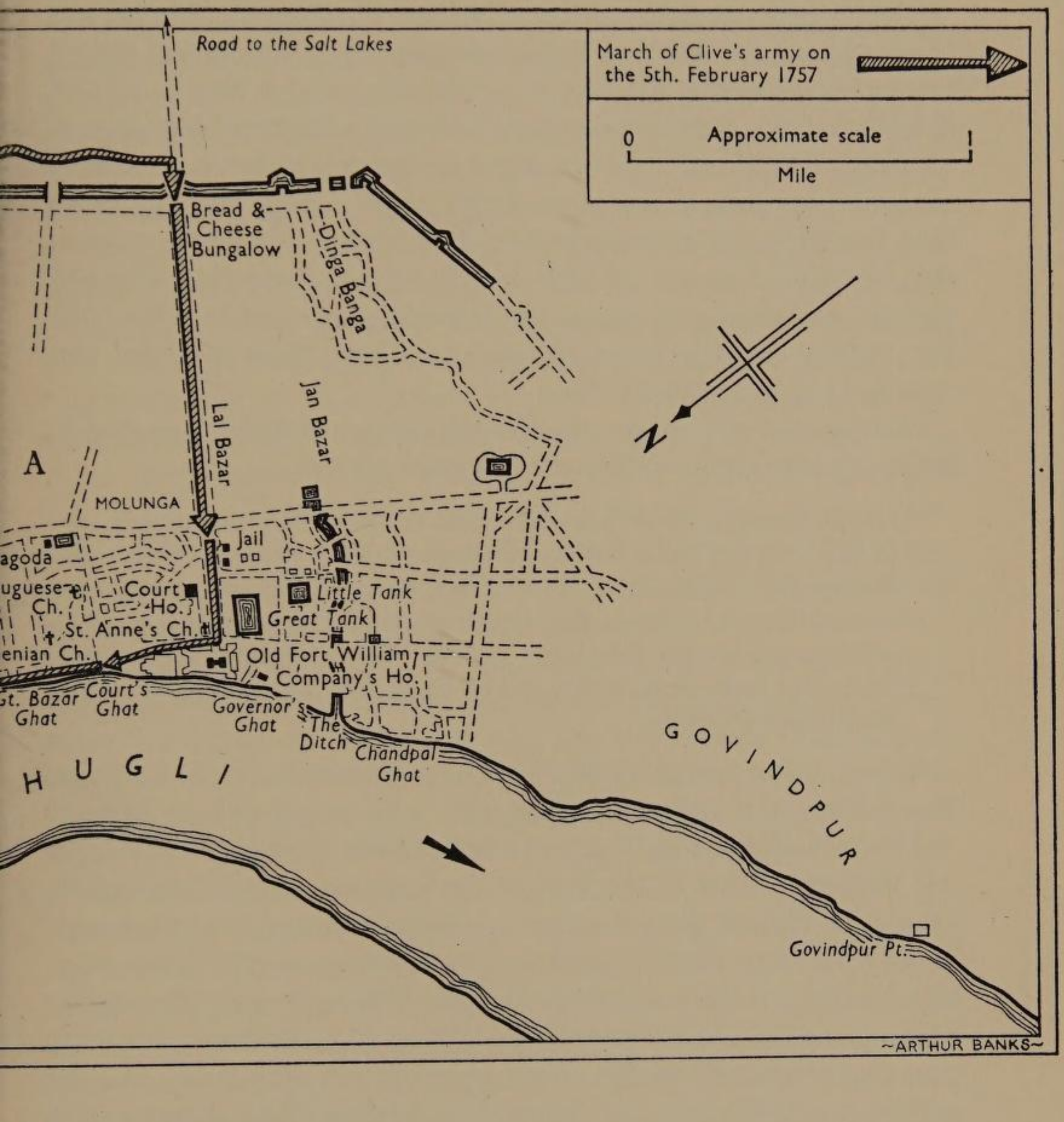
On 2 February, Clive submitted to the Select Committee a letter from the Nawab which asked that the British send envoys. Two were accordingly chosen, and were instructed to add three more demands to the four already submitted. These required that the Nawab should not 'molest any of the merchants or inhabitants of Calcutta', that ships and goods carrying British *dastahs* (or passports) should be protected, and finally that the Nawab and his ministers should agree to these terms under their seals and signatures. It must have been obvious to everyone, however, that the Nawab would never grant these privileges—for British 'abuse' of them was the ostensible reason for his original attack—and that his pretence of negotiation was only to cover up the preparations for war.

Though the Nawab had promised that he would await the British envoys at Nawabganj, some twenty miles from Calcutta, he failed to do so and, on the morning of 3 February, his advance guard entered Calcutta. A small British force under Lebeaume was sent to drive them out and, at about 5 p.m., Clive sent a larger body which 'advanced towards the enemy to discover their situation and whether they were making any lodgment [a camp] that could disturb us; whereupon a cannonading ensued which was soon discontinued as night came on, when both parties returned to their respective camps.'

That same evening Clive received yet another letter from the Nawab, explaining that his force had only moved into Calcutta to find a decent camping ground! He also asked that envoys should be sent to him. Clive decided to send Walsh and Scrafton with the Select Committee's proposals. The two men left for Nawabganj, where the Nawab was himself still supposed to be, on the morning of the 4th, and it was not until evening that they were finally taken to his camp in Calcutta. Scrafton described their reception:


Road to Dum Dum
NAWAB'S CAMP
Maratha Ditch
Batteries
Chitpur Tank
CLIVE'S CAMP
5/2/1757
Dum Dum or
Cow Cross Br.
Sham Bazar
Sobah Bazar
C A L
BAGH BAZAR
CHIT PUR
Chitpur Br.
Kelsall's Octagon
Perrin's Redoubt
Powder Mill Ghat
SUTANATI
Sutanati
Ghat
Clive's advanced
Post
R I V E R

Calcu


Road to the Salt Lakes
March of Clive's army on the 5th. February 1757
0 Approximate scale 1
Mile
Bread & Cheese Bungalow
Dinga Banga
Jan Bazar
Lal Bazar
A
MOLUNGA
Jail
agoda
uguese Ch.
Court Ho.
St. Anne's Ch.
enian Ch.
Little Tank
Great Tank
Old Fort William
Company's Ho.
t. Bazar Ghat
Court's Ghat
Governor's Ghat
The Ditch
Chandpal Ghat
HUGLI
GOVINDPUR
Govindpur Pt.
N
~ARTHUR BANKS~

1757

> At seven in the evening the Soubah gave them audience in Omichand's garden, where he affected to appear in great state, attended by the best looking men amongst his officers, hoping to intimidate them by so warlike an assembly.

The envoys were not allowed to see the Nawab, for he was 'firmly persuaded that they had private arms about them and waited to assassinate him'. The Nawab's ministers, on his behalf, refused the envoys' demands that the Nawab should withdraw his troops to Nawabganj. When the envoys asked permission to leave, they were requested to go and see Jagat Seth's agent before leaving, as he 'had something to communicate to them that would be very agreeable to their Colonel'. Walsh and Scrafton, suspecting that the Nawab was trying to detain them while preparing to attack the fort, retired to their tents, pretended to have gone to sleep, and then escaped and rejoined Clive.

Clive agreed with the envoys that the Nawab probably intended to attack, and decided to deliver the first blow himself.

> I went immediately on board Admiral Watson's ship and represented to him the necessity for attacking the Nabob without delay; and desired the assistance of four or five hundred sailors, to carry the ammunition and draw the artillery; which he assented to. The sailors were landed about one o'clock in the morning. About two, the troops were under arms, and by four, they marched to the attack of the Nabob's camp.

Clive's force consisted of about 470 rank and file, 800 sepoys, 600 sailors, and seventy artillerymen with one howitzer and six field pieces. Estimates of the strength of the Nawab's army vary, but it is reasonable to accept that the numbers were in the region of 40,000, including 18,000 cavalry, forty guns and fifty elephants. Clive's plan was first to attack the enemy's camp, which was scattered widely to the east of the Maratha Ditch, to move through it to the causeway over the ricefields and then to make for the Nawab's tent in Omichand's garden. The morning was very misty and the guides lost their way and, instead of leading Clive direct to the Nawab's camp, brought him too far south. There, out of the fog appeared the Nawab's guard, who were almost completely annihilated by the British. In great confusion, the darkness broken only by the flash from gunfire, the British force reached the causeway. There they found themselves under very heavy fire and

withdrew into the Ditch itself. While they were re-forming, two heavy guns opened fire on them, killing twenty Europeans. Clive now decided to abandon the attempt to force the causeway and gave the order to march a mile and a half to the south, to a road which also crossed the Ditch. At 9 a.m., the fog suddenly lifted, and revealed to Siraj-ud-daula's men the sight of Clive's force marching across a muddy plain bereft of trees or any other cover. Guns opened up, and Clive's aide-de-camp was killed at his side. Cavalry now attacked and Clive called up his artillery. Two field pieces had to be abandoned. At 10 a.m., the columns reached the road and formed up to make the crossing of the Ditch. The defenders, a strong body of horse and foot, held out and attacked the British strongly, until a field piece which had been saved from capture by Ensign Yorke helped to send them flying. The British now crossed the Ditch.

It was no longer possible for Clive to make for the Nawab's camp. He was too far south and the only way to reach it would have been along the Maratha Ditch where he would be at the mercy of the enemy on the edges. Clive therefore continued his march up the road which led directly to Fort William and reached there about 11 a.m. At seven in the evening, Clive and his men left for the camp he had established about a mile north of the town.

British losses were heavy in proportion to their small numbers—twenty-seven soldiers, twelve sailors and eighteen sepoys killed; seventy soldiers, twelve sailors and fifty-five sepoys wounded—a larger casualty roll than in the battle that was soon to be fought at Plassey. Enemy losses, said 'by the best counts 1,300 killed and wounded, including twenty-two officers, some of which were of Great distinction; upwards of 500 horses were counted on the spot with four elephants and a number of camels etcetera'.

The effect upon the Nawab of Clive's little victory was to produce an offer of peace. The reasons for this sudden reaction of the Nawab are not known for sure, but it appears probable that pressure had been put to bear upon him by his commanders. Two letters, one from Watson and the other from Clive, were interpreted to the Nawab as a threat to take him prisoner and send him to England. Whatever the real reason, Clive reported to the Select Committee on 6 February that:

> The Nabob has decamped with his whole army, has wrote me a letter that he will comply with all our demands except a sum of money for

> the inhabitants, viz. that he will put us in possession of everything granted by the royal *phirmaund* [firman], liberty to fortify Fort William as we please, and the liberty of a Mint. He concludes with desiring me to sign these proposals, and that he will sign and seal them immediately, that he will send me a *seerpah* [a robe of honour] elephant and jewels.

The fact that the Nawab had withdrawn his army from Calcutta made Admiral Watson believe that the letter was a trick 'to amuse us in order to cover his retreat and gain time till he is reinforced'. The Admiral advised Clive not 'to be overreached by his politics but make use of our arms' and suggested that a Council of War be called. When it was, Clive's opinion that further action was unnecessary received support. However, when two days passed without news from the Nawab and when a letter was then received from Ranjit Rai (who was carrying on the negotiations on the Nawab's behalf) which seemed prevaricating, Clive sent a peremptory note demanding that his proposals be immediately accepted.

> I am surprised that the Nabob and you trifle. I observe that you are not inclinable to agree to our proposals. God is my witness that my actions have been open and generous, and that my inclinations have been Peaceful. I now send you the articles wrote fair. Let the Nabob sign 'agreed' to each separate article in the manner that I have upon the copy. If this is done there shall be Peace, if not, do not concern yourself further in this affair. War must take its course.

The Nawab replied immediately, accepting all the points, and formal agreements were exchanged between the two parties—signed by the Nawab and his ministers on one hand and Watson and the Council of Fort William on the other—on 9 February. In the treaty, the British gained nearly all that they had hoped for, but one of the clauses was not quite as satisfying as it appeared on the surface. The Nawab agreed that goods belonging to the Company, its servants, and tenants, should be restored and 'what has been plundered and pillaged by his people shall be made good by the payment of such a sum of money as his justice shall think reasonable'. But this was conditioned by the Nawab's promise to restore only 'whatever has been seized by my orders' and what had been entered into his books. This meant that the goods looted by his officers and others on their own account would not be restored. Furthermore, no provision was made in the treaty for the losses of private

sufferers, some of whom had been ruined. The Nawab, however, agreed to pay a sum of 300,000 rupees for this purpose, as well as a sum which was to be paid to Clive and Kilpatrick, and a further 20,000 gold *mohurs* which was to be distributed amongst leading persons in Calcutta. The last sum was not, in fact, disclosed to the British as it was in reality a device of Ranjit Rai's to make a handsome profit for himself.

War had now been officially pronounced between France and England and, although the Nawab would not agree to assist the British against the French, he did write a letter to Watson containing the following words: 'As long as I have life *I shall esteem your enemies as enemies to me* and will assist you to the utmost of my power wherever you may require it.' He also wrote in the same manner to Clive. These letters were later held by the British to be solemn undertakings, and the Nawab's refusal to assist the British was regarded as a breach of the treaty.

When the treaty had been concluded, the Select Committee began to regret the leniency of its terms and called a Council of War to consider whether the British were strong enough to extort even better terms from the Nawab. The Council advised that Siraj-ud-daula should not be pressed further, and the treaty was left unbroken.

The effect on Clive of the continuous attacks to which he was subjected by the Select Committee and of the friction between the latter and the Council of Madras—which had so generously come to its aid—was to divert his mind to the better organisation of British interests in India. The three principal settlements of Bombay, Madras, and Bengal, acted quite separately and often in conflicting directions. The French, on the other hand, had a centralised control. Why should not he, Clive, be appointed governor-general of India? He wrote to his father that 'as this success [the defeat of the Nawab] has probably saved the Company, this is a proper time to push my interests'. But the campaign in Bengal was not yet over and, though the future was to bring him to the governorship of Bengal, it was Warren Hastings—an as yet unimportant figure—on whom the honour of becoming the first governor-general of India was to fall nearly thirty years later.

12

Intrigues Against the French

THE TREATY with the Nawab ended, at least for the time being, the first phase of Clive's mission in Bengal. European rivalries were now to play their part in the drama. The British attitude towards the French in Bengal was an odd mixture of political and commercial antagonism, and personal friendship. Even before the siege of Calcutta by the Nawab, spies had reported to the British that the French were helping Siraj-ud-daula, and the presence of the French troops under French command amongst the Nawab's forces only confirmed this, though they were in fact deserters. On the personal level, those of the British who had been captured by the Nawab and later handed over to the French, or who had escaped to Chandernagore, found only kindness and help in their distress. But the attitude of those (including Clive) who had come from Madras was rather different. There in the South, the British had actually fought and been defeated by the French, and though they had hit back successfully they were prepared to welcome an opportunity of attacking once again an old enemy.

The French had expected an attack by the British and had attempted to get some promise of neutrality out of them. Renault, the chief at Chandernagore, was in a very difficult position. His fortifications were not adequate against a determined attack, and, though he heard of the declaration of war in Europe before the British did, he had no authority to declare war himself without permission from the French headquarters at Pondicherry. With the Nawab on one side and the British on the other, the only hope that he could see for the continuance of French trade in Bengal was to hang on as best he might, while hoping for better times to come. Renault had, however, made such defensive preparations as he could; in December 1756, he began clearing the ground round the

fort at Chandernagore of the houses that surrounded it which, as they had done at Fort William, commanded the walls of the fort. On 4 January, unaware that the British had recaptured the town, there arrived at Calcutta two envoys sent by Renault. They congratulated Watson on the achievement and asked the views of the British about continuing the state of neutrality in Bengal. Watson replied by offering them an alliance against the Nawab. This, they told him, was unacceptable.

While the French envoys were with Watson, the Select Committee learned that the British in Bombay had made a public declaration of war against the French and that the French were to fortify Chandernagore. The next day, 7 January, the Committee wrote to Watson asking him to arrange a neutrality pact with the French in Bengal. For some reason, the letter was not actually sent to Watson until three days later, by which time the French envoys had left. Watson replied that, having offered the French an alliance, he was not prepared to offer less, but that he would not himself attack the French if such an action might be harmful to the interests of the Company.

When their envoys returned, the French were undecided what to do next. When, therefore, they were requested towards the end of January to mediate between the Nawab and the British, it came as something of a relief, for the French thought it might be possible to insert a clause continuing neutrality in any treaty between the British and the Nawab. As we saw in the last chapter, the British refused the offer of mediation, though they themselves brought up the question of neutrality. This British attitude derived very simply from the knowledge that they could not hope to win against the Nawab and the French combined, and any sign of hostility towards the French might drive them into an alliance with the Nawab. At that moment, however, Renault actually feared the Nawab more than he did the British. Again, the reason was simple—the Nawab with his immense army was near Chandernagore. Renault was unwilling to anger him by negotiating with the British. He had, however, received instructions from Pondicherry not to join the Nawab but to fortify Chandernagore. Renault received no money and very few troops from his chief at Pondicherry.

The treaty which Siraj-ud-daula concluded with the British after his defeat made no mention of the French, but the letters he wrote to Watson and Clive (in which he had stated that the enemies of the

British were his also) were taken to mean that the Nawab would not oppose an attack on the French at Chandernagore. The Select Committee had urged Watson to attack the French, but he had not been willing to interpret the Nawab's letter as permission to do so. Watson's other reasons were more pertinent. His troops had suffered greatly from fever, and he did not wish to start a campaign until reinforcements had arrived. Furthermore, he could not move his ships up river until after the spring tides. The Committee did not press the matter for the time being.

As the Nawab passed Chandernagore after his defeat by the British, he sent Renault 100,000 rupees—a third of the money, in fact, which he had extorted from the Frenchmen in the previous year—and gave the French a *parwana* (a letter under his seal) granting them all the privileges he had been forced to concede to the British. He further offered them an alliance in return for the town of Hugli. Renault accepted the money but not the alliance, though it seems probable that he did promise to resist the British should they attempt to move up river. The British, however, believed that a secret alliance had been agreed upon. The French, they decided, must first be disposed of before the final accounting was made with the Nawab. The first step, then, must be to avoid hostilities with the French while pressure could still be brought to bear on the Nawab to keep him from supporting them.

To achieve this aim the British had, as required by their treaty with the Nawab, sent one of their number as agent at Murshidabad. They chose Mr Watts for the task. The appointment was an astute one, for the Nawab thought Watts—who had been outmanœuvred with such ease at Kasimbazar—was 'a helpless, poor and innocent man'. Siraj-ud-daula was greatly mistaken, for Watts knew the language and quite a lot about native diplomacy. The Select Committee had given Watts precise instructions as to what he was supposed to achieve. He was to make the following demands:

1. The privileges granted by the Emperor were to be entered in the emperor's books, and strict obedience to them was to be publicly ordered; the villages granted to the British under the *firman* were to be delivered to them.
2. The article concerning the Mint should be explained and extended.

3. The British were to be allowed to punish any of the Nawab's officers who infringed their *dustucks*, without waiting to complain to the *durbar* (court).
4. Strict enquiries were to be made into the losses of the Company's servants and of private Europeans, and restitution was to be made either by the Nawab or those of his principal henchmen who had plundered the Europeans unknown to him. Any servants of the Company who had taken advantage of the 'troubles' to defraud the Company were to be arrested. Manik Chand was to refund the fines he had extorted.
5. Should restitution for private losses be refused, the Nawab was to pay all debts owed by the British to his own people.
6. The Courts of Justice established by the Company's charter should be permitted by the Native government.
7. European agents of the Company should be received politely at the *durbar*, without being expected to make any presents to the Nawab or his officers.
8. The Nawab was to erect no fortifications on the river below Calcutta.
9. The factory at Patna was to be reopened without payment of any 'token' to the *durbar*.
10. Siraj-ud-daula was to order his officers to restore to the British all books, papers, and accounts belonging to them.

Watts was accompanied on his mission by Omichand, who had got himself back into favour. There is no doubt that Omichand had played a double game. He had sought revenge for his treatment by the British and had achieved it in the sack of Calcutta. At the same time he had no wish for the British to be driven out of Bengal. First and foremost, he was a merchant and his main interest was in the resumption of profitable trade. He had, as we have seen, opened up communications with the refugees at Fulta. When news came of the return of the British he thought it wise to leave Calcutta for Murshidabad. When the British arrived at Calcutta on 20 January, they seized his property on suspicion of treason. Eight days later, Omichand wrote Clive a letter:

> God be praised that Calcutta is again restored to its former splendour by your arrival. Most fortunate is their lot who serve you, but how unhappy is mine who am secluded from your presence by my

confinement, which you must be acquainted with. I hope that when I shall have the honour to be called to attend you I shall be able to find means to procure my liberty. At present I understand that I lie under your displeasure by means of some evil persons who have misreported me to you. . . . I have made it the subject of my constant devotion that God would bring back my masters into the country. God has granted my prayers. How little I am deserving of blame will be evident when I appear before you, and then I shall have justice done me.

The implication that Omichand was now trying to put over to the British was that, in fact, he was virtually a prisoner with the Nawab's troops. On 9 February, Clive wrote to Omichand, promising him a safe conduct if he would come and see him. Nevertheless, when Omichand arrived at the British camp, he appears to have been imprisoned; but his ability to ingratiate himself had not deserted him and he was soon released to act as an intermediary with the Nawab after the treaty had been signed. It was then decided that Watts should be accompanied by Omichand, 'whose conduct in the late negotiations had effaced the impression of former imputations, in so much that Mr Watts was permitted to consult and employ him without reserve'.

When Watts arrived at Hugli on 17 February, he sent Omichand to win over the governor, Nandkumar. In this, he was successful, acquiring a great deal of information about the Nawab's dealings with the French. When they reached the Nawab's camp some forty miles south of Murshidabad, on the 21st, Omichand bribed the Nawab's chief spy, and learned that Siraj-ud-daula had no intention of keeping the promises he had made in the treaty with the British. At the Nawab's camp (and later at Murshidabad) Watts found himself up against French intrigues and discovered that nothing could be done to combat them, except 'in the mode of the court—that is by opposing corruption with corruption, making friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, and getting upon even ground with those whom we are obliged to contend'. In such a situation, Omichand was invaluable.

Meanwhile, Clive had crossed over the river in preparation for an attack upon Chandernagore if the Nawab's permission were received. Renault now once again opened negotiations for neutrality. On the same day as his letter was received at Calcutta, another letter

was also received from the Nawab, 'absolutely forbidding hostilities against the French' as a violation of the treaty. He also maintained that the British had been planning to attack him during the rainy season and that he had only been prevented from sending troops, under Mir Jafar, by the coming of Omichand who 'with persuasion sweeter than honey on his lips' convinced him, temporarily, that it was really the French he had to fear.

While all this was going on at Murshidabad, the French had sent two envoys to negotiate at Calcutta. There, the Select Committee asked them whether they had the authority with which to conclude a 'neutrality which shall be binding on all Frenchmen within the prescribed limits' (i.e. Bengal) and to stop the French navy from attacking the British, whether they were prepared to stop fortifying Chandernagore, and other questions. The envoys replied that they were so empowered, though they could not agree to stop their defence works which were, they said, designed to protect them 'in case of any revolution.' A treaty was therefore drafted and, on 2 March, the Committee 'agreed to write to Admiral Watson sending a copy of the treaty explaining our reasons and asking his opinion and whether he will agree thereto on behalf of His Majesty and lodge with us a confirmation of the treaty on his part'. Watson replied that he did not believe, and never had believed, that Renault had the authority to sign such a treaty, and he could not give his approval until the terms of it had been accepted by the French chief at Pondicherry. The Committee replied by asking the Admiral 'either to reconsider his objections . . . or to assist us with a squadron to attack Chandernagore without delay'. Watson would not agree to either of these propositions. He was not prepared to break the promise he had given the Nawab not to attack Chandernagore, until such time as the Nawab himself broke the terms of the treaty.

Clive was incensed by Watson's refusal to support the Committee's proposals to the French, for 'you may be assured, the instant the French find these offers of neutrality refused, they will immediately assist the Nabob in all his designs against us'. If this happened, the plan to eliminate the French as probable allies of the Nawab would have failed. Clive informed the Council that if there was to be no attack on Chandernagore and no treaty, he must return to Madras. Clive would, in fact, have preferred a treaty with the French because he did not feel strong enough as yet to attack them—or rather to

start a campaign that would not end with the capture of Chandernagore; for, he wrote 'if you attack Chandernagore you cannot stop there, you must go further. Having established yourselves by force and not by the consent of the Nabob, he by force will attempt to drive you out again'.

By 6 March, however, Clive had changed his mind and now believed that the Nawab could be persuaded that his own safety would be enhanced if the British attacked Chandernagore. The letter from Watts had contained a postscript in the Nawab's own hand, asking for British help against the Afghan, Ahmad Shah Abdali, who had invaded India, sacked Delhi, and was now believed to be marching eastwards intent on the conquest of Bengal. Siraj-ud-daula had made the same appeal for aid, with payment in cash, to Watson on 22 February, but Watson had not informed the Committee. Watson, in fact, replied to the Nawab's letter on the same day as the Council received Watts' letter. He told Siraj-ud-daula that the best way was to dispose of the French first, and the British would then 'go with you even to Delhi if you will'. No answer to this came from the Nawab and, when Watson heard that an appeal had also been made to the French for aid, he sent a threatening letter:

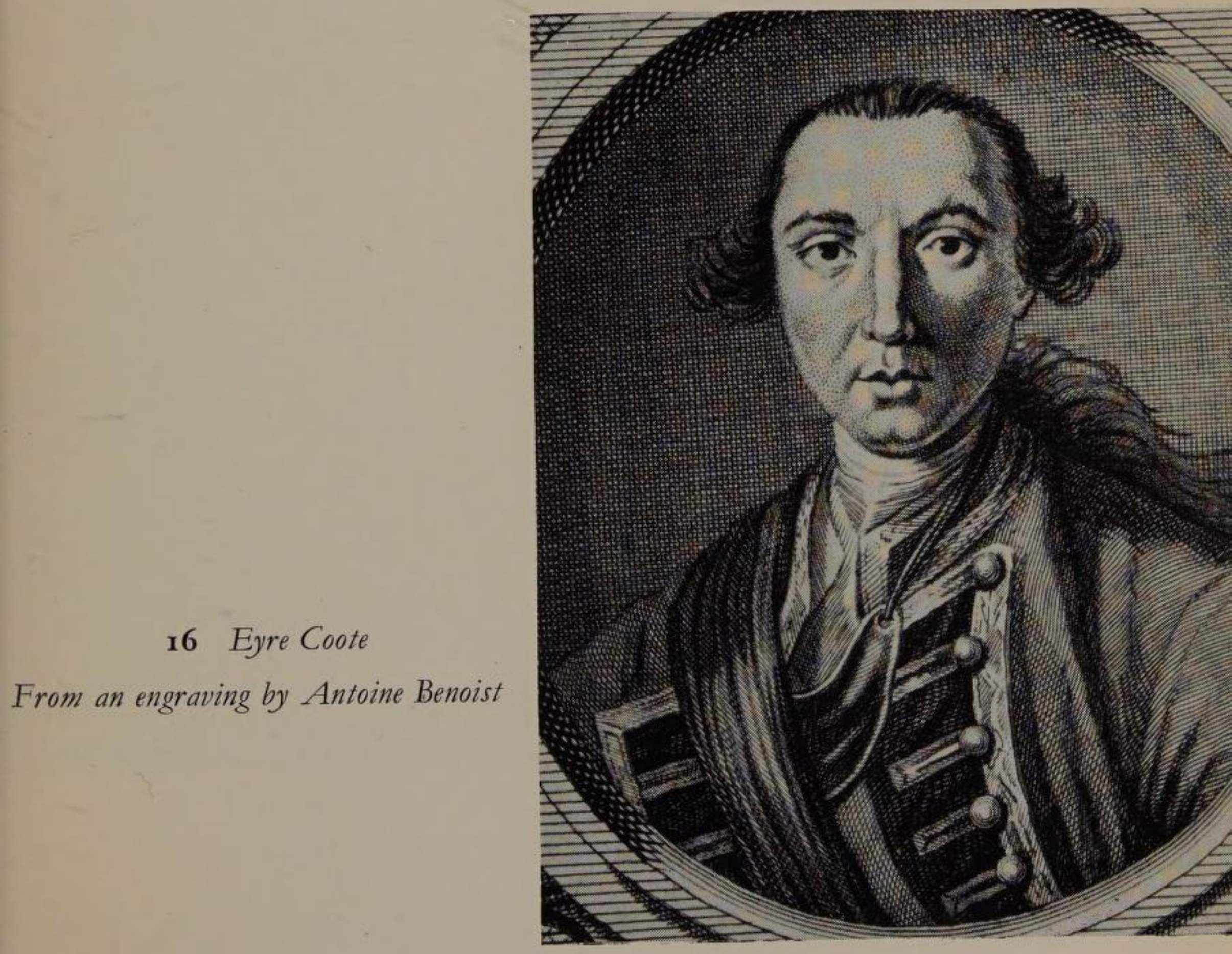
> As I have always acted the open, unreserved part in all my dealings with you, I now acquaint you that the remainder of the troops, which should have been here long since (and which I hear the Colonel told you he expected), will be at Calcutta in a few days; that in a few days more I shall despatch a vessel for more ships and more troops; and that I will kindle such a flame in your country as all the water in the Ganges shall not be able to extinguish. Farewell: remember that he promises you this, who never yet broke his word with you or with any man whatsoever.

Whether it was Watson's threat or Omichand's and Watts' diplomacy that produced results is not clear—certainly Watts made skilful use 'of the Nawab's dread of the Afghans and observed to him that we could never think of leaving our settlement to be attacked by the French', and pointed out that the British could not come to his aid and leave themselves unprotected. On 10 March, the Nawab sent Watson a letter which ended:

> You have understanding, and generosity; if your enemy with an upright heart claims your protection, you will give him your life,

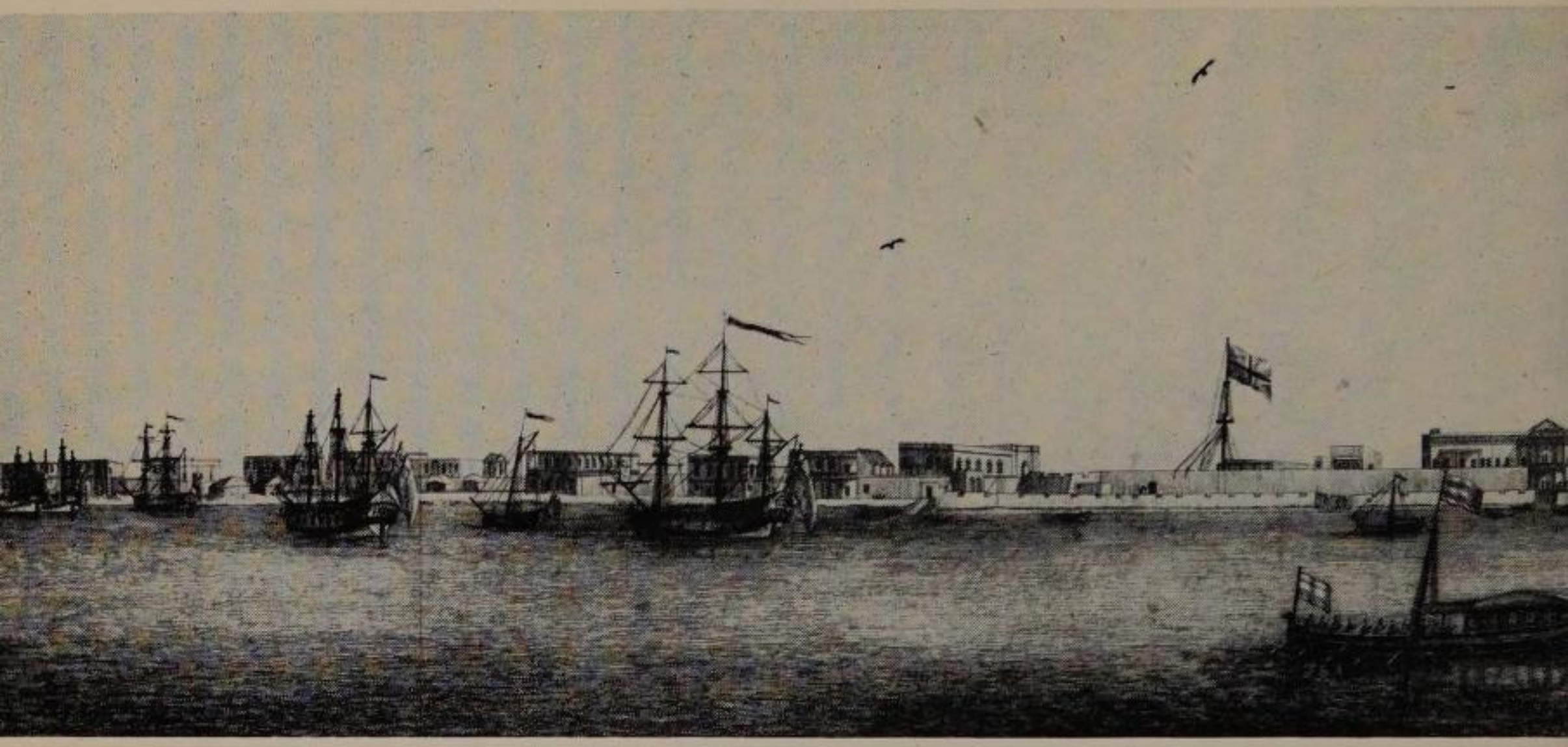
15 *Warren Hastings*

From an engraving after a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds



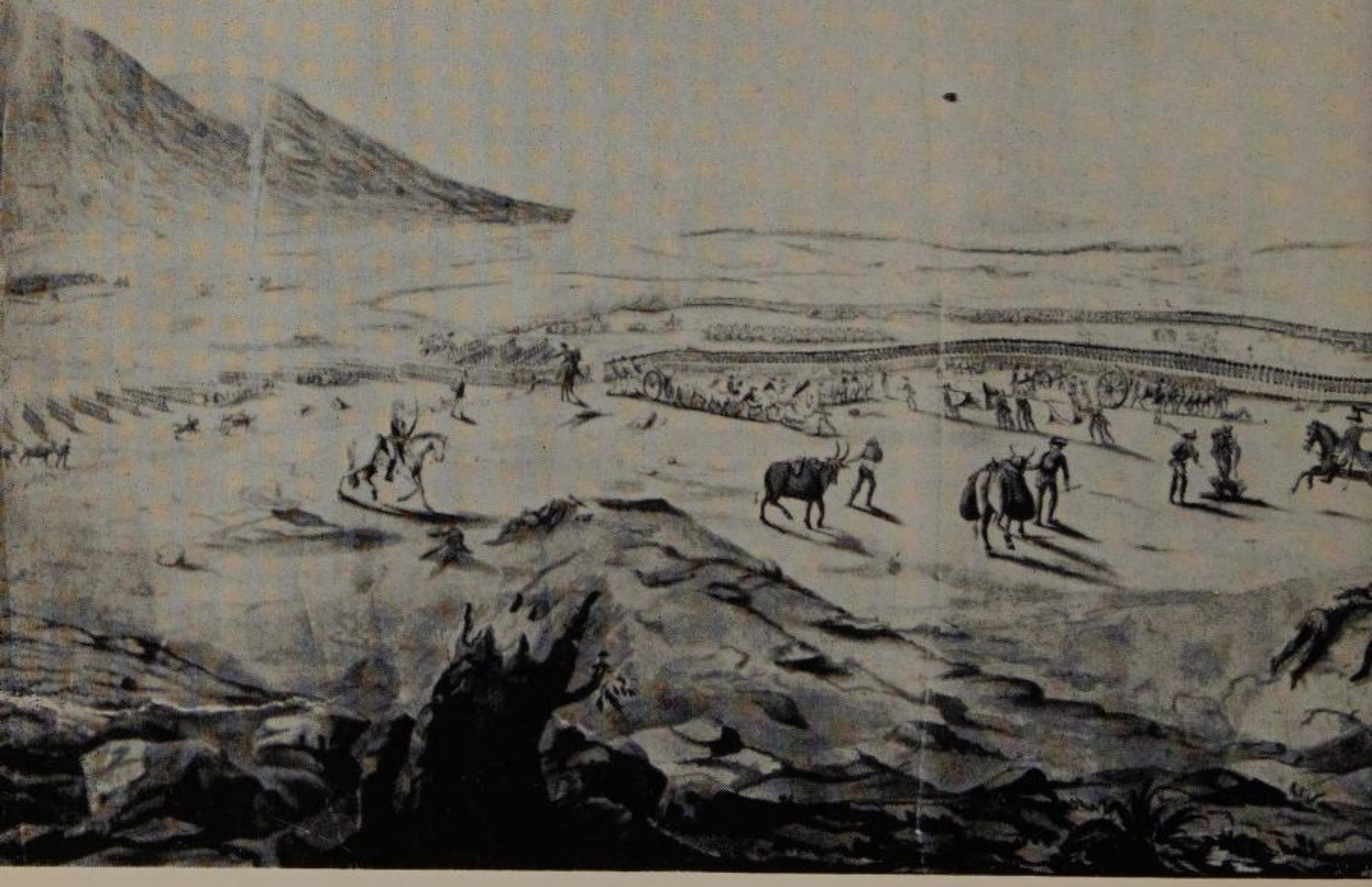
16 *Eyre Coote*

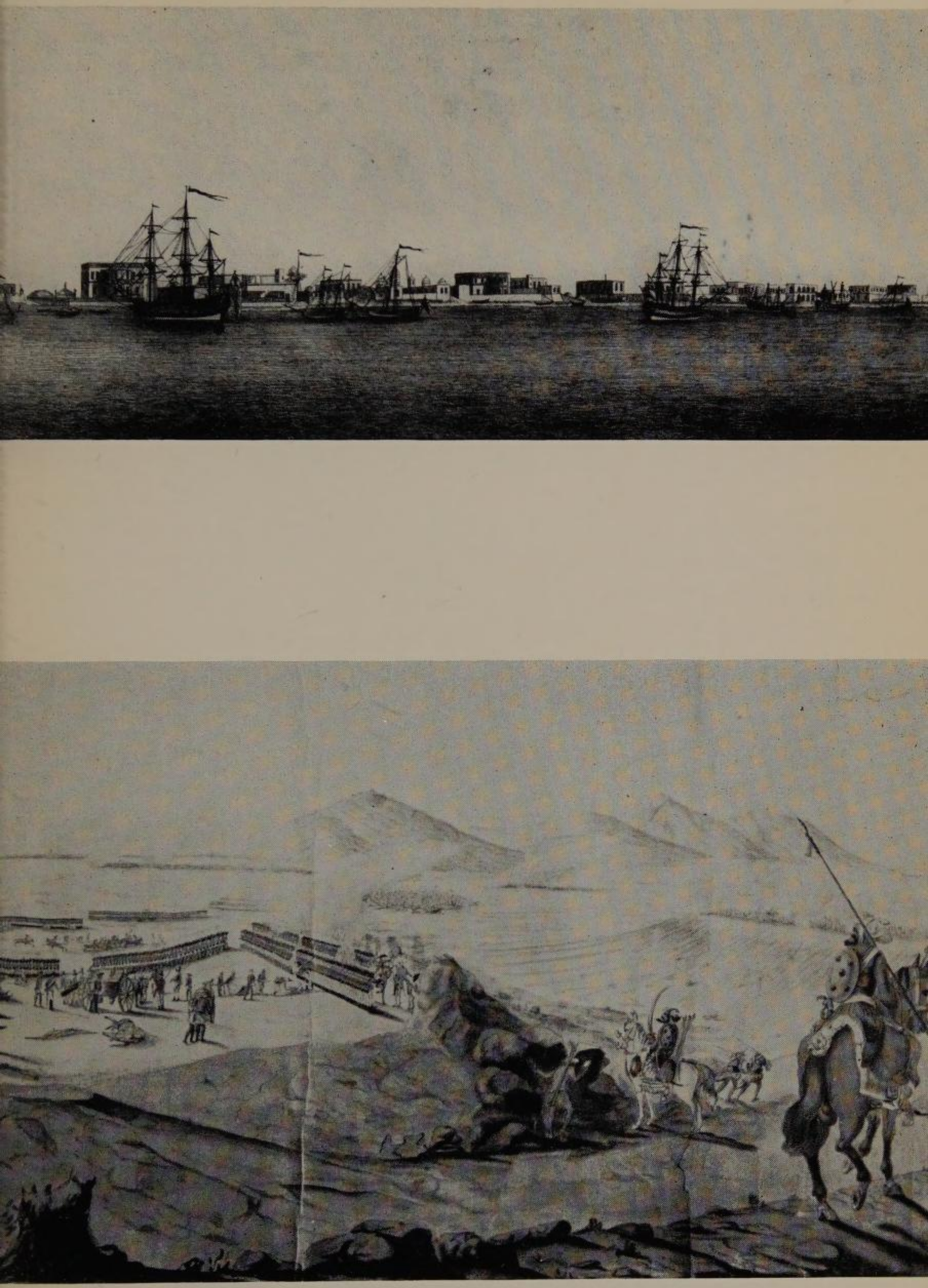
From an engraving by Antoine Benoist



17 *Calcutta in 1756*
View from the west bank of the Hugli; Fort William is on the left of the picture

From an engraving by T. Kitchin





18 *British troops and native cavalry deployed for battle*

From a water-colour by a native artist

19 *Calcutta, showing the Old Fort on the left, Holwell's Monument on the right, and between them, in the distance, the house occupied by Clive after Plassey*

From an engraving by Thomas Daniell

but then you must be well satisfied of his intention; if not, whatever you think right, that do.

Watson took this as permission to attack Chandernagore. Watts also wrote to Clive that 'the Nabob said he could not write, but desired I would inform you that if you was determined to attack the French, he would not intermeddle or give them the least assistance, he only requests to be informed of your sentiments three or four days before you begin upon action'. The Frenchman, Jean Law, suggests that the letter to Watson was not written on the Nawab's orders but that Watts bribed the Nawab's secretary 'to pen this important Epistle in a proper style' with the Nawab's seal affixed. It is more probable that Watts paid the secretary to write the letter with considerable haste, before the Nawab changed his mind. Whatever the truth, the letter was despatched and received by Watson on the 11th or 12th.

Watson was no longer unwilling to attack Chandernagore and, in sending a copy of the Nawab's letter to the Select Committee, he informed them that he had received instructions from the Admiralty in London that the 'Declaration of War [against France] is an order to all officers under the King to distress the enemy as far as it is in their power' and that as soon as he could he would send his ships up the river.

On 3 March, Clive, using the Nawab's appeal for aid as an excuse, joined his troops and, four days later, wrote to the Nawab that it would be better to dispose of the French first and that he would move up to Chandernagore and await orders. The French, hearing of Clive's move, wrote demanding an explanation and received the perfectly honest reply on 9 March that 'I very sincerely declare to you that at this present time I have no intention to attack your Settlement'; Clive added 'if I should alter my mind, I shall not fail to advise you of it'. He continued to advance and, by 12 March—when Watson had just received the Nawab's letter—was encamped about two miles to the west of Chandernagore and was collecting information from his spies as to the extent of French preparations to resist him.

Between 4 and 11 March, the original reason for British negotiations with the French had disappeared; reinforcements then arrived in Bengal from Bombay. These consisted of 400 men, who brought the numbers of Clive's force up to 700 Europeans and 1,600 sepoys.

A ship, the *Cumberland,* had also arrived from Madras after a difficult passage with about 300 men. Clive now felt strong enough to attack. He appears, however, to have been despondent. A long campaign seemed to stare him in the face in Bengal and he feared that the weakened British defences in Madras might well lead to a French victory there. But the French commandant in the south, Bussy, neither attacked Madras nor went to the aid of his countrymen in Bengal. If he had, the course of history might well have been changed.

The forces ranged against Clive were, on the surface, formidable. Besides the French garrison in Chandernagore, the Nawab's troops numbered 2,000 men at Plassey under Rai Durlabh, 4,000–5,000 men even nearer under Manik Chand, and a strong garrison at Hugli. The French agent at Murshidabad, Jean Law, had powerful friends at court and it was still possible that the Nawab might be persuaded to support the French. But the British had even more powerful supporters. The Seths, the great bankers, were in fact (although they were not particularly pro-British) preparing to overthrow the Nawab. Because of this, Law found that the Seths 'managed so well that they undid in the evening all that I had effected in the morning'. Watts, of course, was continually at work keeping the Nawab's fears of invasion by the Afghans at boiling point.

When Clive learned of the Nawab's letter to Watson, he sent a letter to Renault, the governor of Chandernagore:

> Sir—the King of Great Britain having declared war against France, I summons you in his name to surrender the fort of Chandernagore. In case of refusal you are to answer the consequences and expect to be treated according to the usage of war in such case. I have the honour to be, Sir, your most obedient and humble Servant,
>
> R. Clive

The following day, 14 March, having received no reply from Renault, Clive read the Declaration of War to his troops and began the siege of the French settlement by attacking an outpost to the south-west of the fort.

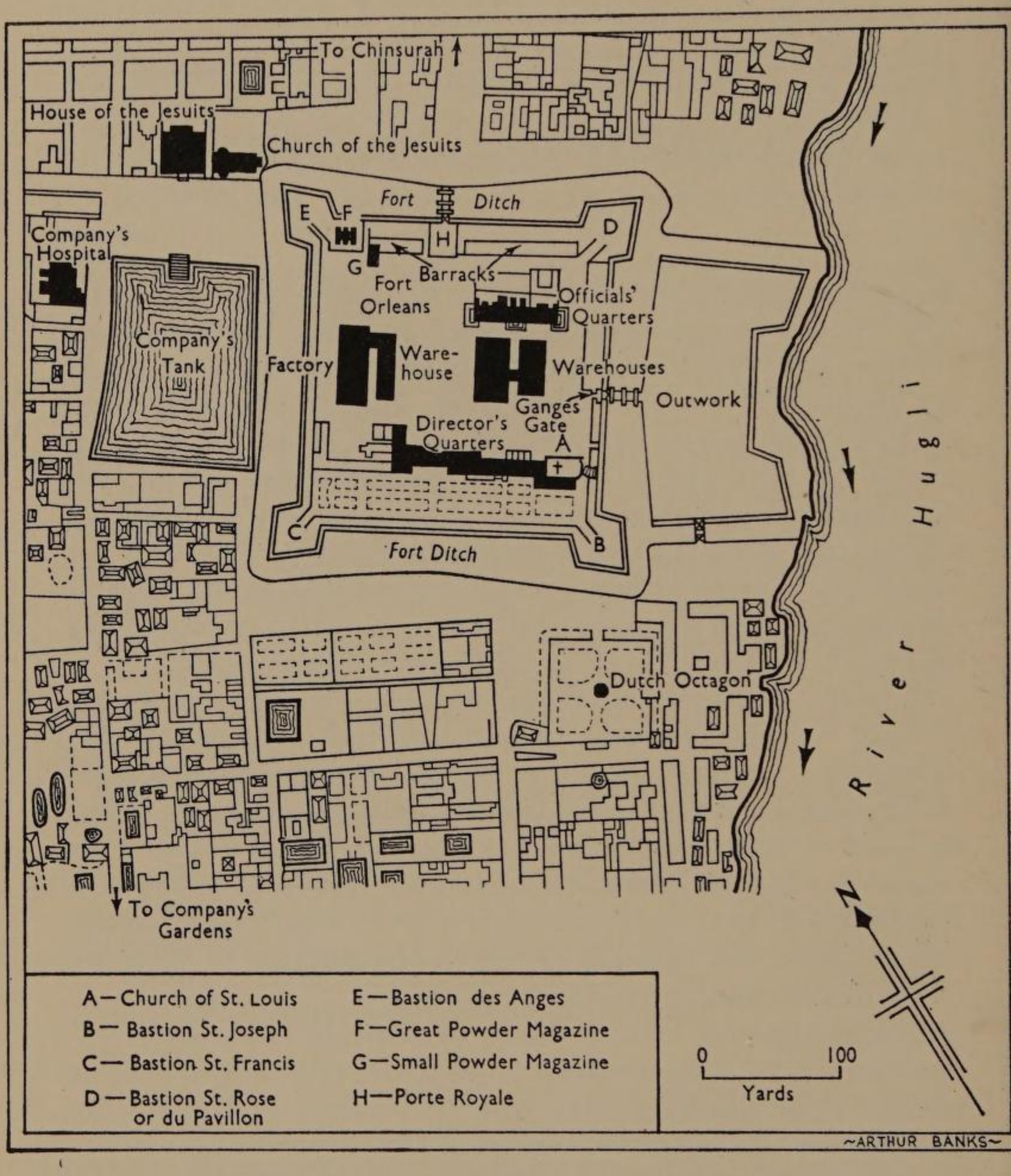
13

The Capture of Chandernagore

IT NOW seemed probable to Clive that all he would have to contend with if he acted promptly was the French garrison at Chandernagore. He relied upon Watts and Omichand to keep the Nawab from ordering his troops to the aid of the French. Renault, after he had lost ten men at the outpost first attacked by Clive, found that he could muster only 237 soldiers, 120 sailors, seventy Eurasians and civilians, 100 merchants and ships' officers, 167 sepoys, and 100 Eurasian artillerymen: in all, 794 men to defend fortifications which were not in any state to stand a siege. Renault also had 2,000 of the Nawab's men who had been sent to him by Nandkumar on instructions from the Nawab, but who in fact deserted after the British attacked.

Clive did not at first press his attack very strongly, preferring to await Watson's arrival as his own force had no siege guns. He nevertheless occupied a number of outposts, and this was the success which precipitated the desertion of Nandkumar's contingent. When he heard of this, Nandkumar—who had, as we have seen, gone over to the British—sent a message to the Nawab informing him that Chandernagore had fallen. This had the effect of frightening Siraj-ud-daula, and Law was unable to persuade him to order his troops to assist Renault by attacking Clive.

Clive continued to move slowly forward and, by 22 March, he had managed against stiff opposition to get a battery of 24-pounders in position to bombard the inner works of the fort. At daybreak the next day, the fleet, which had been lying some two miles down river, moved up to Chandernagore. The passage of the fleet had not been easy. Tides had made it difficult to move up, and the French had obstructed the river (which at this point was very narrow) by sinking 'two ships, a ketch, a scow, a hulk and a vessell without masts' in the channel by the fort and had put booms across the river. Above



Chandernagore

the fort, three vessels had been made into fireships. The cables of these were cut by a small naval party in boats, but they all drifted on to a sandbank. On the following morning, 20 March, Watson sent a lieutenant under a flag of truce to demand Renault's surrender. As Clive's small-bore artillery had done very little damage to the main fortifications, and as Renault believed the river to be efficiently blocked, he refused and instead offered a ransom. As the lieutenant was rowed past the sunken ships, he saw that it would be possible for the British fleet to pass through an unobstructed channel. On the same evening, one of the British captains buoyed this channel under heavy fire from the French. The fleet now prepared to move up opposite the fort, but, because of the tides, it was unable to do so until the 23rd.

Just before daybreak, Clive attacked and took the French battery commanding the river passage. The *Tyger, Kent*, and *Salisbury* negotiated a route through the sunken vessels. At about 7 a.m., the first two took up their position opposite the north-east and the south-east bastions of the fort. The *Kent* had really intended to lie off the centre curtain of the fort, but had been caught by the current and dragged down river, so preventing the *Salisbury* from coming up. It was therefore left to the *Tyger* and the *Kent* to bombard the fort. Oddly enough, both vessels carried an Admiral's flag, for Admiral Pocock, whose ship was the *Cumberland,* had come up in his barge 'with a spirit worthy of an English Admiral' in order to take part in the attack. He had hoisted his flag on board the *Tyger*. The duel between the guns of the fort and those of the ships was severe. The *Kent* was so badly mauled that she never put to sea again and most of her officers were killed. Watson, however, was said to have behaved 'very cool'. At one time an explosion set fire to articles on the decks and some of the men abandoned ship; they were shamed by an appeal to traditional British phlegm. 'Are you Britons?', an officer is alleged to have taunted them. 'You, English-men, and fly from danger?' Apparently, 'this reproach had the desired effect; to a man they immediately returned into the ship, repaired to their quarters, and renewed a spirited fire on the enemy.'

The cannonade continued for nearly three hours. In the fort, the batteries were covered with dead and wounded and the walls were torn to pieces. Clive and his men waited close by the walls, ready to attack. But Renault decided to surrender, and accordingly 'ordered

the drum to beat a parley'. Lieutenant Brereton, the only officer of the *Kent* apart from Watson who had not been killed or wounded, and Captain Eyre Coote went into the fort under a flag of truce and, reported Coote, 'in about a quarter of an hour, I returned to the Admiral with the Governor's son and a letter concerning the delivery of the place'.

The terms of the surrender were now discussed. The most important were that the officers of the garrison were to be 'prisoners of honour', i.e. free but agreeing not to fight against the British as long as hostilities continued. The ordinary soldiers, however, were to be prisoners of war, while the sepoys were to return to their homes. Under the terms of the parole for officers—and even the civilians were assumed to come into this category—they were to 'have leave to go where they pleased with their cloaths and linen'. The Articles of Surrender were signed by Watson and Pocock, and Clive was also allowed to sign although Watson had objected that he was not entitled to do so, since it was really the fleet who had captured the fort.

Casualties on both sides during this action were severe. The three-hour bombardment of the fort had cost the French over 200 killed and wounded. On the British side, Clive's force had hardly been scratched owing to the fact that his attack was well planned. It was on board the *Tyger* and the *Kent* that the real damage had been done. The *Tyger* had lost thirteen men killed and fifty wounded, including Admiral Pocock who was described by one of his officers as 'very lame and swelled about the legs but not greatly hurt; the splinters flew so thickly around him that he was scratched most shockingly and covered with blood from head to foot'. In the *Kent* there were nineteen killed and forty-nine wounded, including the Commander, Captain Speke, and his son. 'One shot took off Captain Speke's calf of his left legg, and struck off Billy Speke's thigh; as soon as one got up, he saw the other and a shocking sight it was. Billy bore it very courageously, and the other was no more concerned for himself but said, "Father and son at one time and with one shot is hard indeed".' Billy Speke later died of his wounds.

Many of the soldiers and sailors were angry with what they considered to be too lenient terms for the men who had killed and maimed so many of their comrades, and they began to plunder the town. The church plate was taken and the treasury broken into.

Clive finally hanged two or three of the soldiers and sepoys to discourage the others, and withdrew his camp outside the town in order to cut off the supply of liquor that his men had discovered in the deserted houses.

While negotiations for the surrender were going on, two events occurred which were to have unpleasant consequences for the French, since the British chose to treat them as breaches of the courtesies of war. A store of gunpowder exploded (accidentally, the French maintained) which destroyed a large quantity of valuable plunder. In the confusion some soldiers and civilians—including deserters from the British; desertion was the endemic disease of eighteenth-century armies—broke through the north gate and tried to make their escape to Kasimbazar. Forty of them actually succeeded in joining Law there, while the other hundred or so were killed or captured. Those who reached Kasimbazar helped to swell the French garrison to about 100 Europeans and sixty sepoys. Where Law had been so weak that he needed the protection of the Nawab, it was now Watts' turn to feel insecure.

The French, including M. Renault, who had given their parole and left Chandernagore for the Dutch settlement at Chinsurah, now broke their promise not to serve or act against Britain during the war by proceeding as if nothing had happened. They began to deal officially with the other French trading posts and with the Nawab's government. They also helped those French who had escaped from the fort and were making their way to Kasimbazar. Clive, therefore, demanded that they surrender to their parole and promised to come and take them by force if they did not do so. When they appealed to Bisdom, the Dutch chief at Chinsurah, they were told that the matter was none of his concern. As he had no defences and few soldiers, it was certainly not in his interest to antagonise the British. He had given refuge to the French women and children before the attack on Chandernagore and felt, quite rightly, that he had done all that humanity required. Clive's sepoys surrounded the houses occupied by the French and they, anxious to protect their families, surrendered. After being allowed to arrange their affairs, they were then taken to Calcutta and prevented from indulging in further intrigue. Their imprisonment lasted until 15 June, when the British began their march to Murshidabad, and on 4 July they were permitted to return to Chandernagore.

The other Frenchmen and their families were allowed to live where they wished and most, for obvious reasons, chose Chandernagore. The soldiers held as prisoners of war were kept in the common jail. A few months later, fifty of them dug their way out and escaped. Some reached Pondicherry, but most were either killed or recaptured.

The taking of Chandernagore was of tremendous value to the British. It not only destroyed French influence in Bengal, but dealt, as Clive put it, 'an inexpressible blow to the French Company' everywhere. In south India, native princes threatened by the French were now more inclined to turn to the English for aid. In western India, where the French were intriguing amongst the debris of the Mughal Empire, the power of France no longer seemed so impressive. The capture of Chandernagore brought safety to Calcutta and gave the British undisputed control of the river, so that the conquest became possible of more than just Bengal. The immediate material advantages were also considerable. In Bengal, all the naval and military stores lost at Calcutta were replaced from French stocks held at Chandernagore. When the news reached London, East India stock went up twelve per cent. The French East India Company lost its largest source of revenue. Without the capture of Chandernagore, Plassey and the founding of an empire would not have been possible.

Clive, even with the reinforcements from the *Cumberland* which joined him after the siege, was not strong enough to garrison both Calcutta and Chandernagore. Also, he thought it possible that the French might attempt an expedition from the south. It was therefore decided that the fort of Chandernagore should be destroyed, that the private houses of the merchants should be razed to the ground, and that the Europeans should be deported to the Madras coast. But the campaign against the French was by no means over.

14

The 'Nice and Important Game'

After the capture of Chandernagore, Watson returned to Calcutta taking with him the naval squadron, but Clive remained encamped a mile or so north of the town in order, he said, 'to strike some awe into the Nawab and to facilitate our business at the *durbar*'. Over the British attack on Chandernagore, the Nawab blew hot and cold, from anger to fear. At one moment he greatly regretted sending the letters which the British had taken as permission to attack the French, and he asked Watts to prevent Clive from starting the siege. In an endeavour to call Clive off, the Nawab wrote to him on 15 March that he had received friendly overtures from Ahmad Shah, implying that it was not now necessary to destroy the French. That the Afghans were no longer threatening him, he wrote, he regarded 'as the effect of my friendship with you. I therefore write that you need not give yourself the trouble of coming. I have great pleasure in your friendship. Since on a single letter of mine you were ready to come to my assistance I make no doubt that whenever I shall desire you to come and assist me, you will be ready to join me. I now write that you need not give yourself the trouble of coming.'

The Nawab was not content with only one letter but bombarded Clive, who, reported Watts, 'is said to have received no less than ten of them in one day, and these in very opposite styles, which the Colonel answered punctually with all the calmness and complaisance imaginable, expressing great concern at the impression which the calumnies of his enemies had made on that Prince's mind, and assuring him of his sincere attachment as long as he adhered to the Treaty'.

The Nawab even sent an envoy to try to mediate between the British and the French, for he had received reports from Renault of

great successes against the English. The envoy, however, discovered that these successes were mythical and, in his report, 'extolled the English highly and threw all the blame upon the French'. Nandkumar, who had received another bribe from the British, added his weight against the French by writing to the Nawab, 'that as the French were unable to resist the English he had therefore ordered his troops to Hughley [Hugli], lest his victorious colours be involved in his disgrace'. This, no doubt, referred to the 2,000 who had deserted the French as soon as Clive attacked.

The Nawab, hearing that Clive's guns had done little damage to the fort, ordered Rai Durlabh to move his troops in the direction of Chandernagore in the hope of frightening Clive. Clive's reply was to send him a threatening note.

> I hear you are arrived within 20 miles of Hughly. Whether you are come as a friend or an enemy I know not. If as the latter, say so at once, and I will send some people out to fight you immediately. If as the former, I beg you will stay where you are, for we can conquer the enemies we have to deal with here if they were ten times stronger.

Rai Durlabh stayed where he was.

On the same day, Clive wrote to the Nawab saying that as yet he had 'only made use of musketry' against the French, but that he would bombard the fort in such a way that 'by the blessings of God I hope the place will be our own tomorrow'.

Clive ended his letter with delicious irony by pretending that Rai Durlabh was actually marching to help the British against the French. 'I am much obliged to you,' he wrote, 'but in this case have no occasion for assistance!' Next day, Chandernagore fell and Clive wrote once again to the Nawab to announce his victory, which had been gained by the continued blessing of God, 'and the influence of [the Nawab's] favour'.

When the Nawab heard of the capture of Chandernagore, he sent Clive a letter declaring his 'inexpressible pleasure' at the British victory.

> I thank God that your enemies so easily fell into your hands, and that their great place is fallen into your hands. You have no longer any uneasiness on their account. It has pleased God to make you and all your friends happy in this great victory.

But this did not prevent him, in his rage and fear, from secretly encouraging Law at Kasimbazar and sending letters to the French general, Bussy, who was supposed to have moved from the Deccan to Cuttack, some 200 miles from Calcutta. Fearing also that the British ships might move further up river, though this was not in fact possible, the Nawab ordered that the channel be blocked at Suti and also at Plassey, in order to prevent the ships from attacking Murshidabad.

Clive now sent new instructions to Watts at the capital, directing him on the course he must now adopt towards the Nawab.

> The Bent of our Politicks hitherto has been by haughty and by submissive Letters such as the Occasion requir'd to persuade him to abandon the French to us. We must in pursuit of that system now endeavour to convince [him] that what we have done is best both for him and us; the Argument that will best serve that purpose must be drawn from their Actions on the Coast of Choromandel, compared with ours on the same, that as soon as they had made themselves Masters of Dekan they would not have scrupled attempting the same here. Represent to him in the strongest Light what a State they have reduced Salabut Jung to; that they have extorted whole provinces from him. While the Man that we support is immensely indebted to us, that by our last Advices from the Coast they have exhibited a new piece of Treachery in the Murder of Rajah Vizeramroy whom they had invited to a Feast, and conclude the whole with assuring him that our sole View is to stop the ambitious Progress of the French, to effect which he must enter into a strict Alliance with us; That we shall always be ready to support him against his Enemies, and that we desire in our Return only a strict Compliance with his Treaty with us and free Currency for our Trade; that we do not aim at any further Possessions than what our Phirmaund has given us; that we shall henceforwards act as Merchants, but shall always keep a Force sufficient to support him against all his Enemies. Tell him with such an Army as I now command the French would not fail to raise Disturbances in his Country and never lay down their Arms till they had extorted at least a province from him, But that our whole Aim is to have the Treaty made with him strictly complied with. That it is absolutely necessary that the good Work now begun should be compleated and that he give up to us the French and their Property whereever they are found.

From this it can be seen that, from Clive's point of view, the capture of Chandernagore was by no means enough. The possibility

of an alliance between Bussy and the Nawab was still a threat and, as long as the French remained at Kasimbazar, French influence at the capital remained. Clive had therefore decided, despite urgent appeals from Madras for his return, that he must expel the French from Bengal. And he must do this before the season of the year arrived in which the winds were favourable for sailing ships to make the journey to Madras. A few days after the capture of Chandernagore, Clive had written to Pigot, the Governor of Madras: 'I make no doubt but the forces are impatiently expected at Madras. It is a very great blow which has detained them—no less than the attack and taking of Chandernagore; of more consequence to the Company, in my opinion, than the taking of Pondicherry itself.' He concluded by saying that if the French were totally destroyed in Bengal, the rest of the French possessions in India would decline. He hoped 'to settle everything here in the most advantageous manner' before the end of August.

Watts was now instructed to press a new demand upon the Nawab. The British requested him to force the French to give up their remaining factories. This was directed against Kasimbazar, for the French settlement at Balasore had been taken without a fight after Chandernagore had been captured. Admiral Watson had written to the Nawab several times but had received no satisfactory reply and, after threatening the Nawab on 19 April, the Admiral stopped writing. Watson, who was fully prepared to fight the French, felt it dishonourable to use the war as an excuse for extorting wider concessions from the Nawab after a treaty had been signed with him. Nevertheless, though he was unwilling to be involved himself, he was quite prepared to look on with well-bred disgust while Clive continued his own efforts on behalf of the Company. Watson was a professional sailor, the agent—as he was quick to insist—of the King of England, whose interests he would continue to uphold. Clive, on the other hand, was the representative of a trading corporation whose interests *he* was bound to maintain—and extend. On 29 March, Clive had therefore written to the Nawab, that as long as France and Britain were at war in Europe they would be so in Bengal and, consequently, there could be no peace for the Nawab. It was, in fact, to the Nawab's advantage to give up the French settlements to the British, for 'we shall then be without rivals and our whole thoughts ready to obey your commands and assist you

in punishing all those who dare to molest the peace of your kingdom'. The Nawab, knowing full well that his real safety depended in keeping up the rivalry between France and Britain rather than in ending it, was hardly in a position (after Chandernagore) to do much about it, but he did manage to put up a number of excuses. One of these was that the French had settled in the country with the permission of the Emperor at Delhi; to expel them would reduce the imperial revenues. This was a rather ironic excuse, as the Emperor was a puppet and Bengal had not transmitted any revenues to Delhi for some years. As all his protests proved unacceptable, he finally suggested that Clive should put pressure on Renault to give the Nawab a written injunction authorising him to surrender the French factories to the British. Having done that, the Nawab suggested to Clive that 'whichever they [the French] paid into the treasury, write to Mr Watts to make good here, and it is very well; then you keep possession of the Factory. But if it be agreeable to you, it will be shewing yourself a man of great mind to give it up to them that they may carry on their trade as before'.

Clive, however, though willing to accept the Nawab's terms, was not prepared to force Renault to agree, for 'now that I have granted terms to Mr Renault, and that he is under my protection, it is contrary to our custom after this to use violence and without it would he ever of his own will and leisure write to desire you to deliver up his master's property? Weigh the justice of this in your own mind.' He did, however, offer to send troops to seize the French settlements.

The situation at the Nawab's court was, to say the least, confused. Both the French and British were bribing as many to their interests as they could afford. Law, who had very little money at his disposal, could only purchase those who had not been bought by the British and many, instead of furthering his plans, helped to discredit him. The British, with the aid of Omichand, got more value for their money. The struggle was too much for Law, though he managed to hold his own for three weeks after the fall of Chandernagore, suffering from the Nawab's weathercock policy. Finally, on 13 April, he was summoned by the Nawab. Watts was present and begged him to surrender on the most honourable terms. It seems probable that the Nawab intended to arrest Law and hand him over to the British, but a small force of French soldiers appeared and the Nawab thought better of it. Law was given permission to

march in the direction of Patna, though Watts and his 'friends' at court tried to force him to march southwards, where he would probably have been captured by the British. The Nawab even promised to recall him at some future date but Law, aware that the British had triumphed, replied: 'Rest assured my Lord Nawab, that this is the last time we shall see each other. Remember my words. We shall never meet again.'

On 16 April, Watts reported that 'the French left their factory and marched through the city today'. On his journey Law *did* receive a letter from the Nawab recalling him to the capital, but he suspected it to be a forgery and pressed on to Patna where he was well received by the Nawab's deputy on instructions from the Nawab himself, despite the fact that at the same time the Nawab was assuring the British that he had given instructions for Law to be expelled from the city. The result of all this was a final letter from Admiral Watson dated 19 April, after which the Admiral withdrew from this heated correspondence.

> I have already told you [he wrote] and I now repeat it again, that while a Frenchman remains in this kingdom I shall never cease pursuing him.

The Nawab flew into a rage and ordered the British *vakil* (or native agent) out of court, shouting 'I will destroy them [the British] and their nation'. The next day, the *vakil* was given a dress of honour, as if nothing untoward had happened, and an army under Mir Jafar which the Nawab had ordered to march was halted. A young Englishman, Luke Scrafton, who had been sent to join Watts at Murshidabad, reported that this extraordinary behaviour on the Nawab's part had been incited by those at court who hoped to overthrow him. Certainly, a proposal had been conveyed to Scrafton by Omichand, acting for the Seths, that one Yar Lutuf Khan might be made Nawab; Clive had been informed of this suggestion.

On 26 April Clive wrote to Admiral Watson to tell him that a conspiracy was afoot to replace Siraj-ud-daula. On the same day, Watts wrote that Mir Jafar, supported by two others, was 'ready and willing to join their forces, seize the Nabob and put up another person approved of. If you approve of this scheme, which is more feasible than the other [that of the Seths] I wrote about, he [Mir

Jafar] requests you will write your proposals, of what money, what land you want, or what treaties you will engage in.' Watts also enclosed a note from Nandkumar to the Nawab, which stated that Clive had told him he intended to 'begin my march tomorrow towards the Nabob and do you inform him of it'. This was untrue, but Nandkumar had not received what he felt to be due to him for his help to the British and was now trying to take revenge.

Before Clive received Watts' letter, he had ordered a small force up to Murshidabad to bring back some money. Watts immediately ordered the party back again as the Nawab was now convinced that Clive intended to attack him and was having all British boats searched for ammunition. The Nawab, Watts reported, 'is very uppish. The three-fourths of his army are his enemies. When the agreement with Mir Jafar is settled we cannot have a man more powerful. There is none equal to him.' He advised Clive to be very secretive and to write soothingly to the Nawab.

At this critical moment, the Select Committee decided to interfere. Negotiations with Siraj-ud-daula had been left in the hands of Clive and Watson, though, in effect, Clive was almost completely responsible. As Watts and Scrafton, who had been sent to Murshidabad by Clive, did not always agree, the Committee now proposed to recall Clive's protégé; but after Clive's strong protest, they agreed that Scrafton should remain although Watts was the proper person to handle the Company's affairs at the Nawab's court.

Clive went down to Calcutta on 1 May and, after reading Watts' letter, the Committee decided to take up Mir Jafar's offer. They did so on the grounds that the Nawab's 'dishonesty and insolence shew that the recently made treaty was concluded by him only to gain time; the absolute certainty of his intention to break the peace, as shown by his intrigues with the French [i.e. Law and Bussy]; the hatred felt for the Nabob by everybody makes it probable that there will be a Revolution whether we interfere or not, and it would be a mistake not to assist a probable successor and so obtain the exclusion of the French'.

It was once again time for diplomacy, dissimulation, and soothing letters to the Nawab. Clive wrote that he had sent more than half his force down to Calcutta, and was keeping the remainder at Chandernagore only because 'since your army has almost destroyed it [Calcutta] there is not much room for more soldiers without endangering

their lives by sickness. However, further to satisfy you, I shall order down to Calcutta all my field cannon.' In return, Clive delicately suggested that the Nawab should withdraw his own troops.

This time, however, the Nawab was not soothed. His forces remained at Plassey and he sent money to Law asking him to return to Murshidabad. Law decided not to go. If he had, it is doubtful whether Clive's victory at Plassey would have been decisive. Clive's aim was now to get things moving before the possibility of aid from Bussy became a reality. In pursuit of this, he had to push his own Council—a body of weak and indecisive men—and persuade Watson, who did not wish to be involved, into supporting him.

In Murshidabad, Watts still believed that Omichand was on his side; this was not so. The British decision to support Mir Jafar rather than Yar Lutuf Khan had upset Omichand's plans. Mir Jafar now had the Seths' support and Omichand saw no possibility of gaining anything for himself out of it. He therefore decided to make some profit out of the Nawab himself before he was overthrown and, at the same time, to get something of his own back on the British who had abandoned his protégé, and on the Seths. When the Seths' agent, Ranjit Rai, pressed the Nawab for payment of the sum which he had been promised for his negotiations with the British, Omichand suggested that if the Nawab appointed him as his agent instead, he would save the money Ranjit Rai was demanding. The Nawab agreed and declared Ranjit Rai out of favour, or 'disgraced'. At the same time, he ordered that Omichand be paid a large sum of money owing to him by the state. Enraged, the Seths insisted to Watts that in any arrangement which they might enter into with Mir Jafar and the British, there must be no place for Omichand. Before the Seths told Watts of Omichand's intrigues, Clive had written to him saying that Omichand 'in consideration of his service should have all his losses made good by an express Article of the treaty' with Mir Jafar.

Omichand, who now heard through his spies that Watts knew of his deals with the Nawab, began to have delusions of grandeur and demanded from Watts that he should receive five per cent of the Nawab's treasure as his cut. Watts estimated the treasure as worth forty million pounds sterling at the then rate of exchange, so Omichand was certainly hoping for big rewards—his five per cent would produce some two million pounds, an enormous sum in the

middle of the eighteenth century. It does seem that the size of the Nawab's treasure was exaggerated, but Watts' figure was certainly believed at the time.

Watts now found himself in an awkward predicament. The Seths and their protégé, Mir Jafar, would have nothing more to do with Omichand and his absurd demands. If, however, Omichand was disowned by Watts, he had threatened to betray the whole plot to the Nawab. Whether he would really have done so is quite another matter but the threat was genuine enough. Certainly, if the Nawab heard of the plot he would move against the British, probably in alliance with the French. On 16 May, Watts informed Clive of his fears and also of the urgency that now underlay the decision to support Mir Jafar. The conspirators were so anxious for immediate support from the British that Watts was authorised to send to Calcutta a blank piece of paper bearing Mir Jafar's seal, on which the Select Committee could write their own terms!

Next day, Clive and the Select Committee discussed Omichand's demands. Their attitude was that his conduct in attempting to black-mail them, by threatening to reveal the plot to the Nawab, deserved punishment rather than payment. Under pressure from Clive:

> It was then considered how we might deceive Omichand and prevent a discovery of the whole project, which we run the risque of should we hesitate or refuse to insist on the unreasonable gratification he expects and demands, and on the other hand it would be highly improper to stipulate, much more to demand with any obstinacy, such extravagant terms from Mir Jafar for a person who can be of no service in the intended revolution. So on the other it would be dangerous to provoke a man of Omichand's character by seeming to take no care at all of his interests, and slighting his weight and influence, which might prompt him to make a sacrifice of us and ruin our affairs entirely.
>
> For these reasons we think it will be necessary to form a double Treaty, both to be signed by Mir Jafar and by us; in one of which the Article in favour of Omichand is to be inserted, in the other to be left out, and Mir Jafar is to be informed of that which we design to abide by and esteem authentick with our reasons for taking such a step.

Clive's attitude has frequently been condemned as immoral, and he has been accused of impeaching the honour of the British nation. At a parliamentary enquiry which took place in England some years later, Clive defended himself:

When Mr Watts had nearly accomplished the means of carrying that Revolution into execution, he acquainted him by letter that a fresh difficulty had started; that Omichand had insisted upon five per cent on all the Nabob's treasures, and thirty *lack* [*lakh*: one hundred thousand] in money, and threatened if he did not comply with that demand he would immediately acquaint Siraj-ud-daula with what was going on, and Mr Watts should be put to death. That when he received this advice thought art and policy warrantable in defeating the purposes of such a villain, and that his Lordship [Clive, then created a Baron] himself formed the plan of the fictitious treaty to which the Committee consented . . . That his Lordship never made any secret of it; he thinks it warrantable in such a case, and would do it again a hundred times. *He had no interested motive in doing it,* and did it with a design of disappointing the expectations of a rapacious man.

It is a not unreasonable defence, though perhaps political necessity and the fact that no one gained financially from the trick are not altogether convincing excuses. It is entirely a matter of opinion and is better left as such.

Once the decision to deceive Omichand had been made, Clive proceeded to put it into effect—and with no half measures. His first act was to send Watts a letter in which he instructed him to 'flatter Omychund greatly, tell him the Admiral [Watson], Committee and self are infinitely obliged to him for the pains he has taken to aggrandise the Company's affairs, and that his name will be greater in England than it ever was in India'. In order not to arouse Omichand's suspicions by too quick an agreement over the sum involved, Watts was also instructed to haggle.

Clive was now confronted with the last remaining obstacle to the successful playing of the game. For the fictitious treaty to appear genuine, it had to bear Admiral Watson's signature. When the treaty was sent to him, the Admiral refused to sign it although, according to later evidence, he said that 'they [the Select Committee] could do as they pleased'. Clive then ordered a Mr Lushington to forge the Admiral's signature. The false treaty, written on red paper, was then shown to Omichand. The real treaty—to which the Admiral was perfectly willing to affix his name and seal—was drawn up upon white paper. During the parliamentary enquiry which has already been mentioned, Clive maintained that after the false treaty had been sent to Watson, the Admiral 'gave the gentleman who carried

it [Mr Lushington] leave to sign his name upon it'. Evidence was also produced which emphatically denied that the Admiral did any such thing.

The truth however is probably very simple. Watson, as we have seen, was unwilling to involve the king, whom he represented, in the intrigues of the East India Company's servants. As a naval officer he felt that he could not *officially* be a party to the trick played on Omichand. As a *private* person, however, he had fewer scruples. Certainly he was not reluctant to receive a proportion of the spoils that came the way of the British when the Nawab had been overthrown. When the 'donation' to the Select Committee was paid by Mir Jafar, the Admiral demanded—in addition to the prize-money he was entitled to as a senior naval officer—an equal share with other members of the Committee.

While the affair of the forged signature was in progress, the Nawab was not unaware that something was afoot. His spies had reported, and the French had also informed him, that there was a big conspiracy to replace him with Mir Jafar. About 12 May, a letter was received in Calcutta allegedly from the leader of the Marathas, a warlike people who now dominated central India and who controlled the ineffective Mughal Emperor in Delhi. This letter offered an alliance against the Nawab and promised to support the British with 120,000 cavalry. The letter also suggested the terms of an alliance. 'Whatever goods and riches you have lost in Bengal, the double of its value shall be restored by me. Do not on any account make peace with the Nabob. In a few days my forces shall enter Bengal, and the trade of that province shall be entirely yours. The French shall not remain in Bengal. Your forces shall keep them out by sea, mine by land.'

The letter was thought to be a forgery and Clive was convinced that the messenger, a man of no consequence, was a 'Spy sent by the Nabob to discover our Sentiments & who possibly may have rec'd some distant Hints of our Designs'. Nevertheless there was just the chance that the letter was genuine. If so, the British were hardly in a position to offend the Marathas. It was decided, therefore, to send a diplomatic reply. In this the Committee unctuously stated that they were still on good terms with the Nawab, but that, if he did not fulfil his promises, they proposed to renew the war after the rains. Clive, however, saw in this letter an opportunity to make

yet another move in his game with the Nawab. A copy of it was sent to Watts for delivery to Siraj-ud-daula; he was to be informed that the British would 'stand by him to the last' if only he would 'be bold and firm'. The copy was actually taken up to Murshidabad by Scrafton, whom the Nawab received with pretended pleasure. In fact, Siraj-ud-daula was suspicious but Scrafton was apparently able to allay his fears, and the Nawab even agreed to withdraw his armies towards the capital. In the first instance, he had said that only Mir Jafar's force would be recalled. This, of course, would have been dangerous, and Watts proposed writing to Mir Jafar advising him not to move. However, Siraj-ud-daula changed his mind and recalled all three of his chief commanders.

Mir Jafar arrived in Murshidabad on 30 May and was received rather distrustfully by the Nawab. The conspiracy was now reaching flashpoint and Watts was laying plans for his escape from Murshidabad. It was arranged that Omichand should go down to Calcutta with Scrafton, as Watts had no intention of leaving him behind and giving him the opportunity to betray the plot. It was only after some difficulty that Omichand could be persuaded to leave, for, one way or another, he still intended to squeeze money out of the Nawab. Indeed, he succeeded in doing this, though how is still obscure. It was only after Scrafton had assured him that, after the overthrow of Siraj-ud-daula, he would be appointed principal agent of the British at the capital, that Omichand consented to leave. On the way down to Calcutta, Omichand disappeared on a visit to Rai Durlabh, then encamped at Plassey. When he returned, he and Scrafton made for Calcutta and finally arrived there on 8 June. Obviously, Omichand's supicions of British intentions had been aroused, for he bribed the native interpreter of the Select Committee to inform him 'if any deceit to his detriment' should appear in the treaty with Mir Jafar when it was translated into Persian, the customary language of diplomacy at that time.

The terms of the treaty which had finally been sent to Mir Jafar were as follows:

1. Mir Jafar to confirm all the grants and privileges allowed by Siraj-ud-daula;
2. Mir Jafar to enter into an offensive and defensive alliance with the British;
3. All Frenchmen in Bengal with their factories and goods to be

20 *William Watts concluding the Treaty of 1757 with Mir Jafar and his son Miran*
From a print in the possession of the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations after a painting ascribed to John Zoffany

21 *Robert Clive*

From an engraving by A. Walker

delivered up to the British. The French never to be permitted to re-settle in the three provinces;

4. The Company to receive 100 *lakhs* [one *lakh*—one hundred thousand] for the loss sustained by the destruction of Calcutta and for the expenses of the war;
5. The European inhabitants of Calcutta to receive fifty *lakhs* of rupees for their losses at the capture of that town;
6. The Hindus to receive twenty *lakhs* on the same account;
7. The Armenians seven *lakhs*;
8. Omichand twenty *lakhs*;
9. The Company to be put in possession of all the land within the Calcutta Ditch and 600 yards all round;
10. The Company to receive the *Zamindari* [landlord's rights] of the country south of Calcutta between the river and the salt lakes as far as Kalpi;
11. The Nawab to pay the extraordinary expenses of the British troops when required by him for his own defence;
12. The government not to erect fortifications on the river below Hugli;
13. The articles to be complied with within thirty days of Mir Jafar's being acknowledged Nawab;
14. The Company to assist Mir Jafar against all enemies as long as he complies with the treaty.

Article 8, of course, appeared only in the 'red' or false treaty. On top of these demands, Watts had asked Mir Jafar for 'presents' of twelve *lakhs* for the Committee and forty as prize-money for the army and navy. Mir Jafar refused to sign the treaty until he consulted with Rai Durlabh who, apart from being the commander of the largest part of the army was also the Nawab's treasurer. On Rai Durlabh's arrival at Murshidabad on 2 June, it became obvious by his attitude that Omichand had made him suspicious of the British. Watts began to feel that all the conspirators were expendable. He wrote to Clive: 'If you think you are strong enough I am of the opinion we had better depend on ourselves and enter into no contract or have any connection with such a set of shuffling, lying, spiritless wretches.' Rai Durlabh, however, after probably squeezing a promise of money from Mir Jafar, informed Watts that both of them would agree to the treaty. Watts, hidden in a sedan chair, secretly visited Mir Jafar who was still in Murshidabad and kept under the closest watch by the Nawab, and the treaty was signed.

Though the Nawab did not in fact know of the treaty, he now

determined to arrest Mir Jafar; but the men he sent to carry out the arrest were taken by Mir Jafar's retainers, beaten up, and sent back to the Nawab. Instead of delegating a larger body to do the job, the Nawab contented himself with removing Mir Jafar from his command. This, on the one hand, confirmed Mir Jafar's hatred of him and, on the other hand, proved that the Nawab was still weak and indecisive and that in the final showdown the conspirators had little to fear.

It remained only for Mr Watts and the other Englishmen to escape from Murshidabad before the whole conspiracy exploded into full light. Watts, accompanied by Collet and Sykes, left the capital on the pretext of a hunting party near Kasimbazar, on the evening of 12 June.

> In the evening [wrote Sykes] they set out from the country seat, attended by a Mogul servant, a few *peons,* and their greyhounds, having previously left directions with their servants to provide a supper, telling them they should return and entertain the Dutch that evening. It was dark before they arrived at Daudpoor, though they travelled with all possible expedition. On the plain near that place was encamped Roydulub [Rai Durlabh], an officer of the Nabob's with a very large force. Here they were exposed to imminent danger, falling unawares on the outposted guards, but the darkness of the night favoured their escape. By striking off into the plain and taking a circuit of the whole camp they regained the road and arrived about one o'clock in the morning at Augurdeep, where a second misfortune threatened their destruction. They unexpectedly found themselves in the midst of a body of horse, which had been stationed there to prevent the passing or re-passing down or up the country of any Europeans. The first notice they had of this danger was the neighing and kicking of the horses about; their riders luckily were asleep. At this place they quitted their horses, and embarking on two open boats which they had the good fortune to seize, proceeded down the river.

They finally met Clive at Khulna two days later.

Back in Murshidabad, the Nawab heard of Watts' flight almost as soon as it took place. He immediately wrote to the Frenchman, Law, to come to his aid. Though some of his advisers pressed him once again to attempt the arrest of Mir Jafar, the Nawab could no longer trust his own troops, whose pay was in arrears and who might easily decide to desert him. Instead, the Nawab attempted to make

Mir Jafar agree to a reconciliation. Mir Jafar described the Nawab's efforts in a letter to Omar Beg on 19 June:

> The guns and fire arrows were all ready against me, and the people were in arms day and night. Mr Watts's news was known early on Monday. This startled the Nabob; he thought it absolutely necessary I should be soothed; he came to me himself. On Thursday eve the Hughly letter arrived that they were marched. I was to be with him. On three conditions I consented to it. One, that I would not enter into his service; secondly, I would not visit him; lastly, I would not take post in the army. I sent him word that if he agreed to these terms I was ready. As he wanted me, he consented. But I took this writing from all the commanders of the army and artillery: 'that when they had conquered the English they should be bound to see me and my family safe wherever I chose to go'.

With Mir Jafar apparently immobilised, the Nawab now felt himself able to send indignant letters to Clive and Watson. To Clive he wrote:

> Almost everything in conformity to the treaty has been delivered back to Mr Watts; very little only remained. The affairs also with Monick Chand were settling as fast as could be. Notwithstanding this Mr Watts and the rest of the Council at Cossimbazar, going to the Gardens on the pretence of a party of pleasure, have retired from thence in the night, which appears to be done with a very deceitful design and intention to break the treaty. For certainly without your orders and directions Mr Watts would never have acted in this manner. It was the consideration that something of this kind was contriving that hindered me from recalling the army from Plassy, for I know some trick was intended. I thank God, however, the treaty has not been broken on my part, and as it was so solemnly sworn to before God and His Prophet He will doubtless punish him who has first violated it.

The Nawab left Murshidabad and moved slowly to join his army at Plassey. Law had been unable to join him but with the Nawab were a small party of Europeans—thirty or forty in number—under de St Frais, who were to handle the artillery. St Frais was given permission to burn the British factory at Kasimbazar.

The 'nice and important game that was . . . played with the late Nabob', as Clive was later to describe the conspiracy, was now over. The forces of the Nawab and the British were closing upon Plassey, and Siraj-ud-daula's days were numbered.

15

The Place of the Palas Trees

In preparation for their part in the conspiracy the British had not been idle. Clive wrote to Watson on 28 May:

> Affairs are drawing to a Conclusion and as you have throughout the whole shown the utmost Zeal for the Company I am persuaded a Continuance of that Zeal and Assistance will not be wanting on this necessary important Occasion, and I must request the Favour of you to spare 200 Sailors, 100 to accompany and assist us in our march, the other to garrison Chandernagore; there are between 50 and 60 Sailors formerly belonging to the *Walpole* & *Marlborough,* which have been train'd up by us, and would be of great Service. As the Fate of this Expedition must be decided in a few Days, the Sailors cannot be detain'd long, and you may be assur'd of their being returned the Instant the Affair is over.
>
> I must further request it as a particular Favour that you will assist Major Kilpatrick with the Boats of the Squadron if he has not sufficient for the Transportation of his Troops.

To this request Watson agreed, though he warned Clive that 'you cannot be too cautious to prevent a false step being taken, which might be of very fatal consequences to our affairs'.

By 10 June, Clive was ready to move and on that day sent in a request for the sailors as well as for a 20-gun ship to lie off Hugli and prevent the Nawab's deputy there from interfering with the passage of troops. Two days later, 150 sailors and the troops from Calcutta crossed the river and made their way to join Clive at Chandernagore. Calcutta, apart from a few invalids and some artillerymen to man the guns on the ramparts, was left undefended. The force reached Chandernagore the same evening and, on the following day, Clive marched off to meet the Nawab's forces, leaving 100 seamen to garrison the town. The expedition was weak and

Clive was hazarding virtually all the troops he could muster on a gamble: a gamble that Mir Jafar and Rai Durlabh would not aid the Nawab. Clive's force consisted of 613 European infantry, about 100 *topasses* (Eurasian soldiers), and 171 artillerymen including fifty sailors and seven midshipmen under the command of Lieutenant Hayter. The native infantry numbered 2,100, some from Madras and others from Bengal and Bombay. The artillery consisted of ten field pieces and two small howitzers. The European infantry was the 39th Foot. The Europeans went up river by boat, the native infantry marched along the right bank of the river.

On the 14th, this little force reached Khulna—some fifteen miles from Hugli—where they were joined by Watts and his two colleagues. By the 17th, Clive and his men had reached Patli and Clive ordered Eyre Coote, who had been appointed to the rank of Major the day before, 'to possess himself of Cutwa, town and fort about fourteen miles distant'. To carry out this order, Coote was given 200 Europeans, 500 sepoys and two field pieces. Cutwa was an important objective, for its fort—an earthen fortification about a mile in circumference and with eight round towers—commanded the road to Murshidabad as well as the river. It also contained a large store of grain.

Coote arrived outside the fort on 18 June and, as he was unable to bring his guns up the river and also had reason to believe that the Nawab's commander would surrender without a fight, sent a native officer under a flag of truce to demand that the fort be handed over to him. Though he had already been fired upon from the fort, Coote records, 'I had resolved not to return it . . . until I received his [the governor's] answer with regard to giving up the place, which if he refused I would immediately storm and give no quarter.' The governor replied that he 'was resolved to defend it to the last'. Coote then ordered his sepoys to make a mock attack on the front of the fort while the British forces crossed the river to take it in the rear. As they approached, the defenders deserted the fort.

The next day, Clive arrived at Cutwa with the main force, to be met by a torrential downpour of rain. The troops were forced to take shelter in the houses and huts of the native town. Clive now became cautious. From Mir Jafar he had heard nothing since a rather ambiguous letter on 16 June. It was possible that this man, who was already a traitor to the Nawab, was preparing to sell Clive

Battle of PLASSEY June 23rd., 1757

0 ½ 1 Mile

N

Bhagirathi River

Muncarra

Nawab's entrenched camp

E

F

D

French Mir Madan

B

G

Rai Durlabh

C

A

C

Yar Lutuf Khan

C

Mir Jafar

Grove of mango trees

Bhagirathi River

Village of Plassey

A — Position of British Army at 0800 hrs.

B — Guns advanced to check French fire.

C — Nawab's army in three divisions.

D — The tank occupied until 1500 hrs. by the French (supported in rear by Mir Madan)

E&F-The redoubt and mound taken at 1630 hrs.

G — The Nawab's hunting box.

—ARTHUR BANKS—

out too—if only by remaining inactive. When he arrived at Cutwa, Clive wrote once again to Mir Jafar.

> It gives me great concern that in an affair of so great consequence to yourself in particular that you do not exert yourself more. So long as I have been on my march you have not yet given me the least information what measures it is necessary for me to take, nor do I know what is going forward at Muxadavad [Murshidabad]. Surely it is in your power to send me news daily; it must be more difficult for me to procure trusty messengers than you; however, the bearer of this is a sensible intelligent man, in whom I have great confidence. Let me know your sentiments freely by him. I shall wait here till I have proper intelligence to proceed. I think it absolutely necessary that you should join my army as soon as possible. Consider the Nabob will encrease in strength daily. Come over to me at Plassey or any other place you judge proper, with what force you have. Even a thousand horse will be sufficient, and I will engage to march immediately with you to Muxadavad. I prefer conquering by open force.

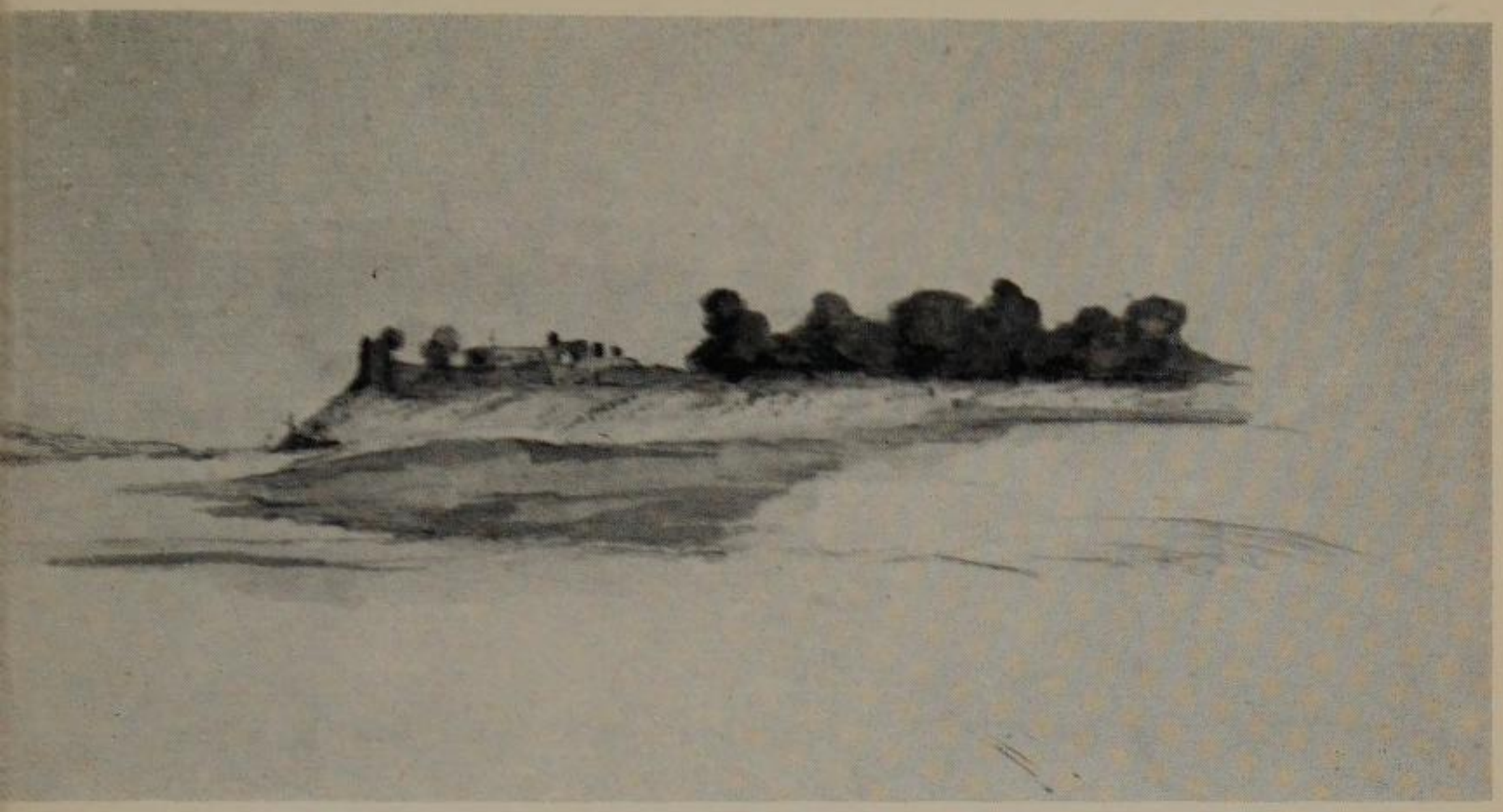
On the same day, Clive wrote to the Select Committee that he would not move until Mir Jafar joined him. If necessary, he was prepared to remain at Cutwa throughout the rainy season, and attempt to force the Nawab into giving in and coming to terms. In case this should not be realised, Clive further suggested an alliance with the Marathas, the Raja of Birbhum, or even with the chief minister of the puppet emperor at Delhi. The Committee's reply was not received until after the battle of Plassey had taken place, but Clive's response to it indicates just what the general tenor of the Committee's letter was. Clive remarked that the contents of the Committee's letter were 'so indefinite and . . . contradictory that I can put no other construction on it than an attempt to clear yourselves at my expense, had this expedition miscarried'.

In the meanwhile, Clive was still doubtful whether the risk of attacking the Nawab should be taken without assistance from Mir Jafar. On 21 June he called a Council of War and put to it the following proposition: 'Whether in our present situation without assistance and on our own bottom it would be prudent to attack the Nabob, or whether we should wait till joined by some Country Power.'

It seemed, said Clive, that the best they could expect from Mir Jafar was neutrality. The Nawab's army, according to reports from

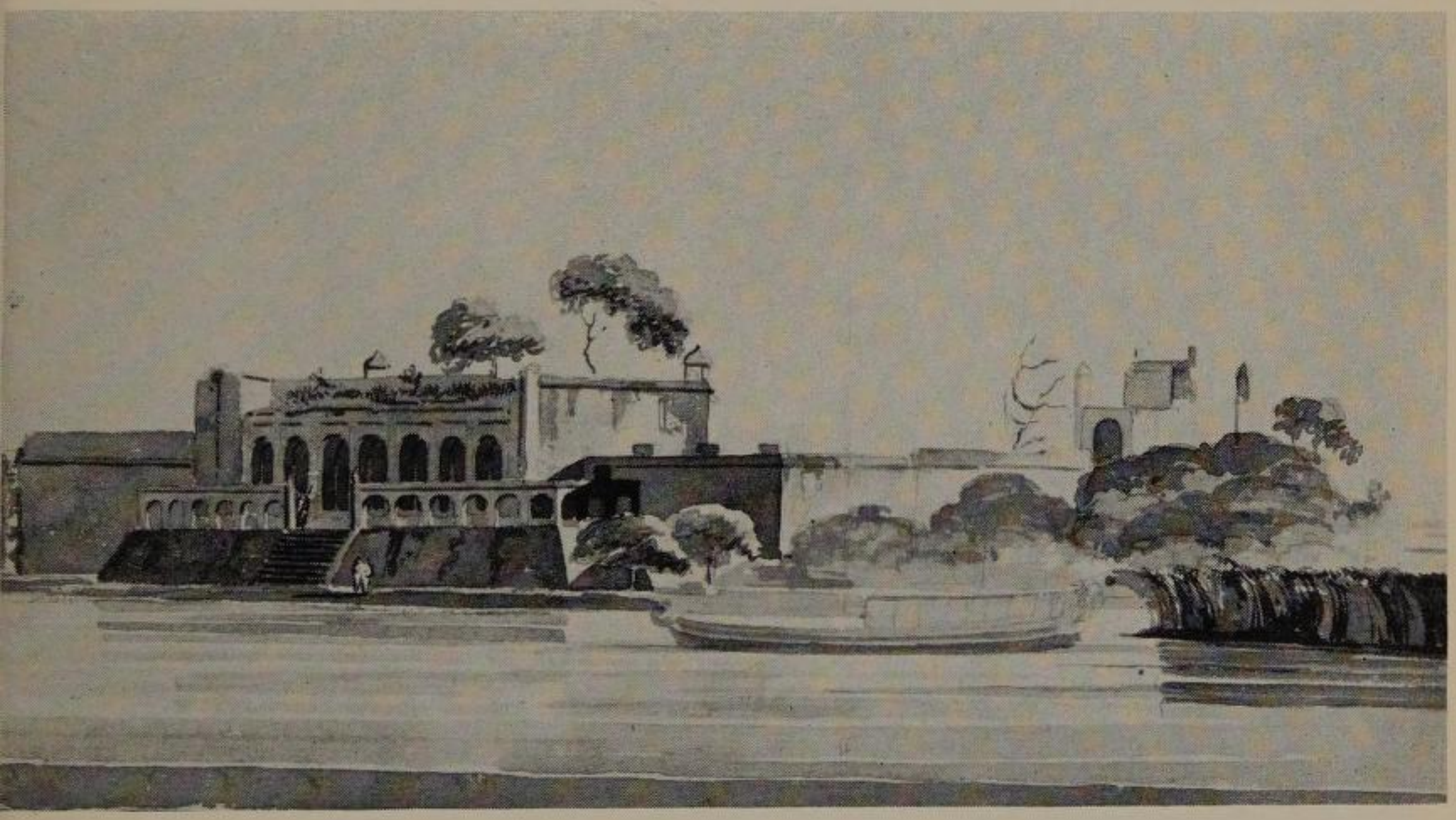
his spies, numbered about 50,000 men, and Law with a body of Frenchmen was only some three days' march away. Clive had no cavalry—in fact, he had written on the 20th to the Raja of Birbhum asking him to join the British and to send two or three hundred cavalry to help them. A letter received from Mir Jafar on the same day had been so equivocal as to inspire further mistrust. Clive had also received a report that Mir Jafar and the Nawab had come to an accommodation. The situation, then, was fraught with peril. Clive, Kilpatrick, and ten others voted for a delay. Eyre Coote, Alexander Grant, and five others demanded an immediate attack. Coote, whose Indian experience was small, did not by any means fully understand the mixture of threat and diplomacy in which Clive was still dealing. He also completely misunderstood his commander's proposition. Coote maintained, among other arguments, that 'we should come to an immediate action; or, if that was thought entirely impracticable, that we should return to Calcutta; the consequence of which must be our own disgrace, and the inevitable destruction of the Company's affairs'. Clive had no intention of withdrawing to Calcutta and merely counselled waiting until Mir Jafar's position would be made clear. He proposed waiting at Cutwa which, as it controlled water communications with Calcutta, could be supplied from there if necessary. Coote had, in fact, in his enthusiasm misunderstood the question, which was simply whether or not the British should move without genuine and unequivocal assurances of support from Mir Jafar. As Clive put it later in his evidence before the parliamentary committee, Coote 'did not even then understand the subject on which he delivered so peremptory an opinion at the Council of War'. Coote's outburst was only one of the many irritations Clive had to put up with. Before the Council had even considered his question, Lieutenant Hayter—a King's officer—had demanded that he take precedence over the Company's captains. When told he could not, he refused to vote and took no part in the Council's proceedings.

After the Council, Clive 'retired into an adjoining grove, where he remained near an hour in meditation which convinced him of the absurdity of stopping where he was; and acting now entirely from himself, he gave orders, on his return to his quarters, that the army cross the river the next morning'. Or so wrote Robert Orme. Coote confirmed that Clive made his decision 'about an hour after



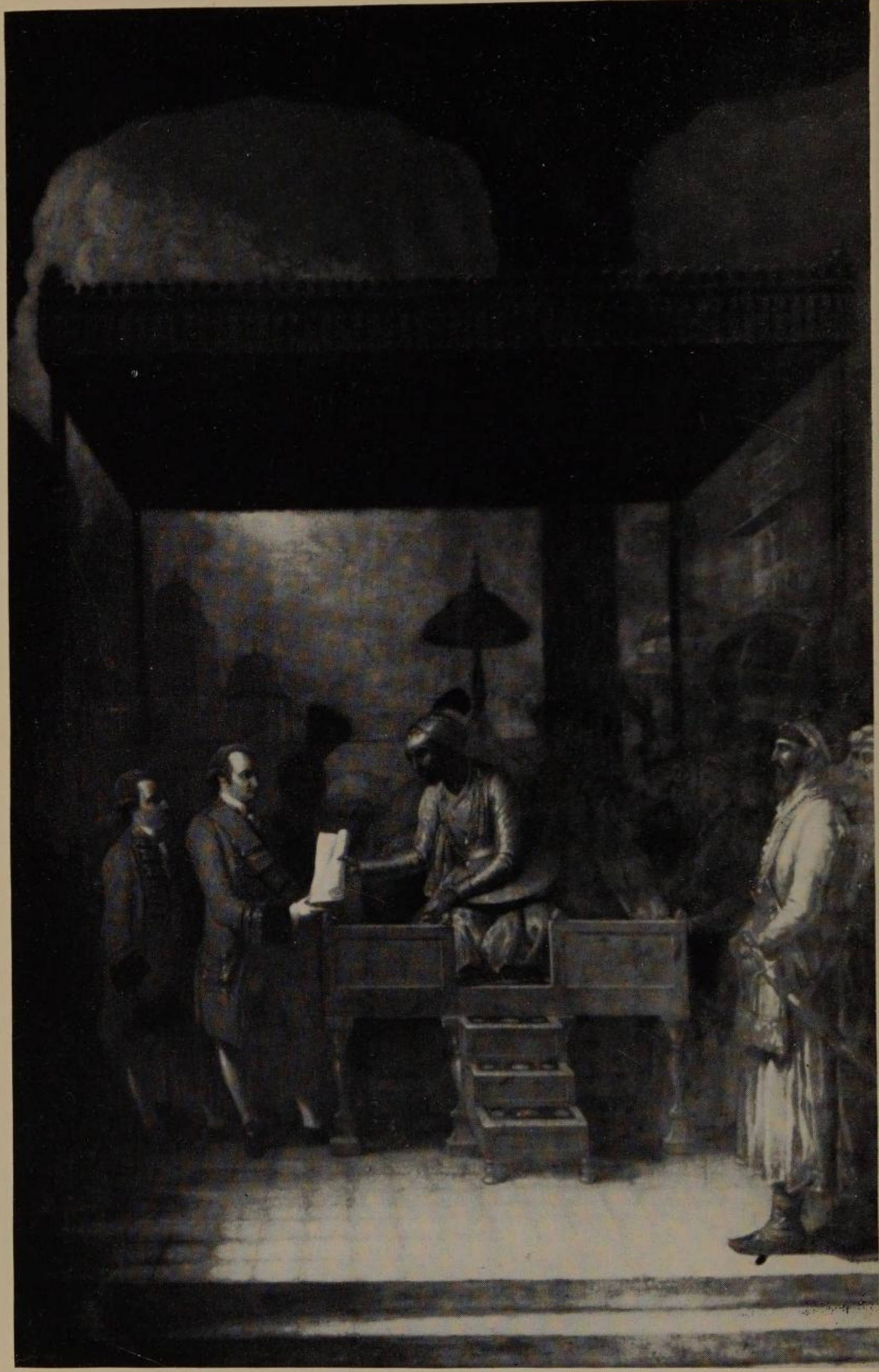
22 *The Nawab's shooting-box, Plassey*

From a water-colour by Captain James Blunt



23 *Plassey from up the river*

From a pencil-and-wash drawing by Thomas Daniell



24 *Shah Alam conveying the Government of Bengal to Lord Clive, August 1765*

From the painting by Benjamin West.

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the Council broke up', telling him that he intended to march the next morning. The rather romantic scene of the great hero retiring into a grove to meditate like some Old Testament prophet, though a fairly innocuous piece of myth-making, does not conform with the evidence. That Clive intended to move against the Nawab is quite indisputable. His position was such that he had reached the point of no return. The bazaars of Bengal were alive with rumours of his intentions. If action was not taken, if any sign of weakness was shown, Mir Jafar and his fellow conspirators would be quick to make an accommodation with the Nawab. The whole future of the British in Bengal was now in Clive's hands—and he was aware of it. In his evidence before the Commission, Clive did not categorically deny telling Coote of his decision to move, but suggested that it was unlikely as he did not in fact march off until the evening of the 22nd. That he marched then was precipitated by the simple fact that, about 3 o'clock in the afternoon of that day, he had received from Mir Jafar a message which gave Clive the assurance he needed.

Mir Jafar informed Clive that he had left Murshidabad and was collecting his retainers together. The Nawab and *his* army were now at Muncarra, a village about six miles to the south of Kasimbazar, and Mir Jafar wrote that the Nawab's intention was

> to have his intrenchment at Muncarra, therefore the sooner you march to fall on him the better before his design can take place. As yet you are now only designing, but it is not now proper to be indolent. When you come near I shall then be able to join you. If you could send two or three hundred good fighting men the upper road towards Cossimbazar, the Nabob's army would of themselves retreat. Then the battle will have no difficulty. When I am arrived near the army I will send you privately all the intelligence. Let me have previous notice of the time you intend to fight.

In reply, Clive wrote:

> I am determined to risque everything on your account, though you will not exert yourself. I shall be on the other side of the river this evening. If you will join me at Placis, I will march halfway to meet you, then the whole Nabob's army will I know fight for you. Give me [leave] to call to your mind how much your own glory and safety depends upon it. Be assured if you do this you will be *Subah* [ruler] of these Provinces, but if you cannot go even this length to assist us I call God to witness the fault is not mine, and I must desire your consent for concluding a Peace with the Nabob, and

> what has passed between us will never be known. What can I say more than that I am as desirous of your success and welfare as my own.

At five o'clock on the evening of the 22nd, Clive and his little force crossed the river. An hour later, Clive despatched a message to Mir Jafar. 'Upon receiving your letter I am come to a resolution to proceed immediately to Placis', and he added, 'I am impatient for an answer to my letter by a trusty man.' The advance continued until 'about twelve at night'; after marching in very heavy rain through the flooded fields that lined the river banks, the first part of the British force arrived at Plassey. The rearguard did not bivouac until about three in the morning. From Mir Jafar's last letter, Clive had expected the Nawab still to be encamped at Muncarra, but on arriving at Plassey he learned that some 6,000 of the Nawab's troops were within three miles of him. Clive ordered 200 Europeans, and 300 sepoys with two field pieces to occupy Plassey House and other points around Plassey Grove (see plan, page 136).

The village of Palasi, as it should properly be spelt, was said to have that name because of the numbers of palas trees that surrounded it. The palas tree is sometimes known as the 'Flame of the Forest' because of the glorious orange flowers which cover it in the early part of the hot weather. If the trees were there in Clive's day, it was not flowering time and nobody mentioned them. The site of the battlefield is so much changed today that none of the features described by eye-witnesses can be properly identified. In 1757, however, on the bank of the river the Nawab had a hunting-box of substantial size, well-built in brick, and called by the English, Plassey House. Surrounding the house was a high wall. Clive made the hunting-box his headquarters.

About fifty yards from the river was a grove of mango trees known as the Laksha Bagh—the Orchard of a Hundred Thousand Trees. This orchard was about 800 yards long and about 300 wide, and the trees were planted in regular rows. Protected by a mud bank and a ditch, the main body of Clive's force bivouacked for the rest of the night.

About a mile to the north, Siraj-ud-daula lay in his tent surrounded by his army. His force consisted of about 35,000 infantry, mainly untrained, badly armed, and without discipline. His cavalry was very much better—some 15,000 men, mostly Pathans from the north-

west, excellent horsemen, well mounted, and armed with swords and long spears. The Nawab's artillery was even more impressive: fifty-three field pieces, mainly of large calibre. What made it formidable was the fact that to direct the native artillerymen there were forty or fifty Frenchmen under the command of M. de St Frais, a former member of the Council at Chandernagore. This little band was, of course, determined on revenge for the defeats which the British had inflicted on the French.

The Nawab also occupied a strategically strong position behind entrenchments which ran along the river, extended about 200 yards inland and then north-east for about three miles (see plan). At the angle where the entrenchment turned north, there was a redoubt mounted with cannon. Three hundred yards east of this, and in front of the entrenchment, was a small hill covered with jungle. To the south of it, about 800 yards away in the direction of the grove occupied by the British, was a small artificial lake, and 100 yards further on a larger one. Both these lakes were surrounded by large quantities of earth, some distance from the banks. It was around these two points that the battle was to be fought.

The Nawab, despite the size of his army and the favourable position it occupied, was disheartened and anxious. He had little faith in his troops and felt himself surrounded by conspiracy. His generals he knew to be untrustworthy, their men willing to fight only for money—in fact, only a lavish distribution of cash had got the army to move out of Murshidabad at all. The omens too had been unfavourable, and little things convinced him that there was scant hope of success.

> As he was sitting in his tent, the evening before the battle, revolving in his mind the doubtful issue, his attendants imperceptibly left him one by one till he was alone; when a fellow entered, unperceived by the Soubah, and carried off the gold top of the hookah he was smoking, and cut off some of the broadcloth of his tent. It shocked his soul to think that he, whose frowns were death but in the morning, should now be so little feared. He called for his attendants, and cried, with great emotion, 'Sure they see me dead'.

This was hardly the frame of mind to encourage his weak character to be decisive at a moment of peril.

As dawn broke on 23 June 1757, Clive took up his position on the

roof of the hunting-box. Before him he could see a wide, lush green plain. The blue sky was broken by the sharp blackness of the monsoon clouds. As the sun rose high, the Nawab's army marched out of its entrenchments and, wrote Scrafton who watched it, 'what with the number of elephants all covered with scarlet cloth and embroidery; their horse with their drawn swords glittering in the sun; their heavy cannon drawn by vast trains of oxen; and their standard flying, they made a most pompous and formidable appearance'. The army moved in three divisions, commanded by the three conspirators, Rai Durlabh, Yar Lutuf Khan, and—Mir Jafar. These three occupied a crescent line from the small hill to within half a mile of the southern flank of the orchard, and the divisions commanded by the two latter now encircled and outflanked the British force. At the larger of the two lakes, M. de St Frais, with the French contingent and four guns, occupied a position some 200 yards from the British. Nearer to the river, two heavy guns under a native officer were also posted. In support were the Nawab's best men, about 5,000 cavalry and 7,000 foot under the command of his one loyal general, Mir Madan.

To Clive, observing this impressive military manœuvre from the roof of the hunting-box, there must have come a moment of doubt. There was no reason why he should trust the conspirators. If they had decided not to support him, he and his little force were lost. If the doubt was there, however, it did not upset him; with Clive, the best form of defence was always to march out and fight, whatever the apparent odds. He therefore ordered his men to move away from the protection of the mango grove, and drew them up in a line running from the hunting-box and directly facing the French. In the centre, he placed his European troops flanked on both sides by three six-pounder guns; on their right and left were posted his native troops split into two equal divisions. About 200 yards in front of the hunting-box were some brick kilns, and there Clive posted a small force with his remaining guns, two six-pounders and two howitzers.

Clive still waited for a further communication from Mir Jafar, but none came. At 7 a.m., Clive sent him a short note: 'Whatever could be done by me I have done, I can do no more. If you will come to Daudipore I will march from Placis to meet you, but if you won't comply even with this, pardon me, I shall make it up with the Nabob.'

An hour later, the battle began. St Frais and his men opened fire on the British line and a heavy and continuous barrage was put up by the Nawab's artillery which was then brought up. The British, with their light guns, could not keep up such a duel. Though the enemy was being cut down in large numbers, they could afford to lose men. The British could not. In half an hour, ten Europeans and twenty sepoys had been killed or wounded and Clive then gave the order for his men to 'retire and lye upon their arms within the bank of the Grove, fronting the enemy as before and drawn up in the same order. Our houbitz [howitzer] was advanced about half-way to the first Tank [lake] and our eight guns properly divided in the intervals, betwixt the battalions and the sepoys but advanced a little distance without the banks of the Grove.' The Nawab's artillery, thinking that Clive was in retreat, moved their guns forward and began to shell the grove. Clive, however, made his men sit down behind the mud bank, while others made holes in it for the field pieces to fire through. The enemy artillery did great damage to the mango trees but the British were now protected by the bank and their casualties diminished. The howitzer by the lake was very effective, one of its discharges mortally wounding Mir Madan. When it seemed that the enemy cavalry was about to attack the forward guns, these were withdrawn.

It was now about midday and no decision was in sight after four hours of battle. The enemy's fire seemed just as heavy, and though casualties were high, the Nawab's army remained overwhelmingly superior in numbers. Mir Jafar still remained quiet. At 11 o'clock, Clive had called his commanders to a meeting. At it, they had decided to hold on to their position in the grove until nightfall and, at midnight, to make an attack upon the enemy's camp. At the time, this was the only possible decision, but an hour later something happened to alter the situation—it began to rain. A monsoon consists of many extremely heavy showers and, at 12 noon on that day in 1757, the thunder rolled and a torrent of rain fell upon the battlefield. The British were prepared for it and quickly covered their ammunition with tarpaulins. The enemy, however, were less agile. They found their ammunition soaked and useless. 'We had some apprehension', wrote one of Clive's officers, 'that the enemy would take advantage of this opportunity [the rain] and make a push with their horse, but our guns continuing to play

very briskly, prevented any such motion. The enemy's guns during the rain, which lasted half an hour, did not fire a shott.'

About 3 p.m., the enemy was seen retiring 'without confusion to their old camp, their artillery marching first'. At about the same time, a large body of the Nawab's troops seemed to be moving in the direction of Plassey village, which was about a mile south of the British position. This village commanded the river passage and it was thought that the enemy intended to move up river to attack the British boats. Artillery fire, however, kept them on the move. Afterwards, it turned out that this particular enemy was the division commanded by Mir Jafar.

Clive, soaked to the skin, came down off the roof of Plassey House to change his clothes, leaving orders with Major Kilpatrick that any new movements by the enemy were to be reported to him immediately. A little later he learned with surprise that, without his authority, a detachment with some guns had moved off in the direction of the large lake. Hurrying after it, Clive caught up with the detachment just as it was reaching the position formerly held by St Frais and his Frenchmen. In command, he found Major Kilpatrick, an old and respected comrade. Clive, in a not unjustified outburst of temper, 'first ordered him under arrest for such unmilitary conduct, but was pacified on receiving an apology'. Clive ordered Kilpatrick back to the grove and took over command. Because of Kilpatrick's move, Clive decided that to retire would inspire the enemy to attack. He therefore sent back for another detachment which soon arrived under the command of Eyre Coote.

Now reinforced, Clive ordered his European grenadiers and a company of sepoys to take up their position along a bank near to the enemy line. This was done under a sharp barrage of musket fire from the little hill, which was returned by the British gun at the lake. Clive's intention was to draw the Nawab's men out of their entrenchment; and in this he succeeded. They poured out to meet him 'but in attempting to bring out their cannon they were so much galled by our artillery that they could not effect it, notwithstanding they made several attempts'. Despite the heavy fire from the British guns, the enemy cavalry prepared to charge. Clive called for reinforcements from the grove but countermanded the order as a large body of enemy horse appeared to be preparing to attack the British position there.

Still the enemy came on, though their casualties were high. Among the dead were four of the Nawab's principal officers. But under the hail of British fire, the enemy was beginning to break up and it was seen that 'their elephants grew very unruly'. This was Clive's opportunity. He ordered Eyre Coote to attack the little hill and another party to take the redoubt held by St Frais and his men. Coote successfully stormed the hill and at the 'same instant' the redoubt was also stormed, 'though the latter was defended by forty Frenchmen and two pieces of cannon'. The redoubt was captured easily because, in fact, the French had received orders from the Nawab to retire.

In the Nawab's camp all was confusion. Mir Madan, who had been mortally wounded by the British guns, had been carried into the Nawab's own tent and had died there. Siraj-ud-daula, after the death of his only loyal commander, knew that all was virtually over. Though he was aware that Mir Jafar had betrayed him, he sent repeated messages to him to come to his tent. Finally Mir Jafar arrived, closely guarded by a strong body of men. Ghulam Husain described their meeting:

> Siraj-ud-daula spoke to him in the humblest strain, and at last descended to the lowest supplication; he even took his turban from off his head (at least this was the report) and placed it before the General; to whom he addressed these very words: 'I now repent of what I have done; and availing myself of those ties of consanguinity which subsist between us, as well as of those rights which my grandfather, Alivardi Khan, has doubtless acquired upon your gratitude, I look up to you, as to the only representative of that venerable personage; and hope therefore, that, forgetting my past trespasses, you shall henceforth behave as becomes a Seyd, a man united in blood to me, and a man of sentiments, who conserves a grateful remembrance of all the benefits he has received from my family; I recommend myself to you: take care of the conservation of my honour and life.' Mir Jafar coldly replied that the day was now drawing to its end; and that there remained no time for an attack; 'send a counter order to the troops that are advancing', said he; 'recall those engaged; and tomorrow, with the blessing of God, I will join all the troops together, and provide for the engagement.' Siraj-ud-daula observed, that they might be attacked by the enemy in the night: this also the General took upon himself to provide against, and he promised that the enemy would not form a night attack.

Mir Jafar now returned to his own troops—and promptly sent a messenger to Clive. Siraj-ud-daula, in his fear, called yet another of the conspirators (Rai Durlabh) to him to ask his advice. Again the advice was the same; the Nawab should withdraw his troops into the entrenchment. Siraj-ud-daula gave in and orders were sent out to his favourite, Mohun Lal, who now commanded in place of Mir Madan. At first, he refused to obey, but after an imploring message from the Nawab he gave in and began to retire. It was this movement that Kilpatrick saw and acted upon. When the Nawab heard that the British were attacking, he mounted a fast-riding camel and made off in the direction of Murshidabad.

By five o'clock the British were victorious. The Nawab's army shattered by the attack and the desertion of the conspirators, retired in a rout. When the British entered the entrenchment, they found masses of abandoned baggage, stores, and cattle scattered about. The British pursued the fleeing army for about six miles and captured five pieces of artillery. But without cavalry, the British could go no further. At Daudpur Clive halted and was joined by Kilpatrick and the remainder of the force. The Battle of Plassey was over.

According to Clive's own estimate, the Nawab's army lost 500 men—small casualties for such an enormous force. The British had lost only four Europeans and fourteen sepoys killed, and nine Europeans and thirty-six sepoys were wounded. But these derisory figures cannot be used as the measure of Clive's success. That can only be found in the fact that 800 Europeans, eight pieces of artillery, and 2,100 sepoys, without cavalry, were matched against an army of some 50,000 men and a large number of guns. Plassey was both a real and a psychological victory. It demonstrated once and for all that a small body of men, well led and disciplined, could defeat the raggle-taggle mob of a native army. The result brought a surge of confidence to the British and a shiver of fear to the native princes.

That same evening, Clive sent a note to 'Charles Watson and the Gentlemen of the Committee of Fort William'. It was brief and to the point:

> Gentlemen—This morning at one o'clock we arrived at Placis Grove and early in the morning the Nabob's whole army appeared in sight and cannonaded us for several hours, and about noon returned to a

very strong camp in sight, lately Roydoolub's, upon which we advanced and stormed the Nabob's camp, which we have taken with all his cannon and pursued him six miles, being now at Doudpoor and shall proceed for Muxadavad tomorrow. Meer Jaffeir, Roydoolub, and Luttee Cawn gave us no other assistance than standing neutral. They are with me with a large force. Meer Muddun and five hundred horse are killed and three elephants. Our loss is trifling, not above twenty Europeans killed and wounded.

EPILOGUE

16

After the Battle

DURING THE battle the conspirators, Mir Jafar and Rai Durlabh, made no attempt to come to Clive's assistance. In fact, as we have seen, suspecting one of their movements as an attack upon him, Clive had opened fire on their troops to keep them at bay. Mir Jafar's reasons for not coming out into the open before the battle was decided, were contained in a letter which Clive received about five p.m. 'He [the Nawab]', wrote Mir Jafar, 'made me write on the side of the Koran so that I cannot come over to you.' He had given his pledge to the Nawab and he felt that, though he could not fight against the British, neither could he fight with them. He therefore remained neutral. By doing so, he showed himself to be rather more than just an opportunist. Later in the evening, Clive received a further message. 'I congratulate you on executing your design. Mirza Aumar Begh, or Mr Watts, or Coja Petrus, send one of them to me. I am here on the banks of the lake agreeable to your desire.' Next morning, the 24th, Clive sent Omar Beg and Scrafton to bring Mir Jafar to Daudpur. He came, accompanied by his son and the not unreasonable fear that Clive's reception would be cold. When he arrived at the camp and the 'guards drew out to receive him as he passed, he [Mir Jafar] started as if he thought it was all over with him; nor did his countenance brighten up till the Colonel embraced him and saluted him *Subah* of the three provinces'. Clive advised him to make for the capital immediately to prevent it being plundered, and Mir Jafar left at once, Clive marching after him the same evening.

Next day, Clive reached Mandipur near Kasimbazar, where he stayed until the 27th. On that day, Clive was warned by the Seths that there was a plot to assassinate him as he entered Murshidabad, and it was not until the 29th—with an escort of 200 Europeans and

300 sepoys—that Clive entered the city and made his way to one of the palaces. On his arrival, Jagat Seth and other rich men sent him presents which Clive refused, telling them that all he wished from them was their 'assistance in settling the government'. That afternoon Clive went in state to the royal palace where Mir Jafar and 'all the Rajahs and all the great men of the court were waiting for him'. In the throne room, Mir Jafar refused to take his seat on the throne and Clive handed him to it and then, 'in compliance with the custom of the country, made his submission to him as *Subah,* by presenting him with a few pieces of gold'. The revolution engineered by Mr Watts and fought for and won by Clive in the grove of mango trees at Plassey, was complete.

Mir Jafar was now Nawab, but Siraj-ud-daula was still alive and could not be allowed to become a focal point of opposition to the new régime. From Plassey, Siraj-ud-daula had reached Murshidabad on his fast-riding camel to find the city full of nobles, none of whom was prepared to come to his aid. The palace was full of treasure and Siraj-ud-daula spent 24 June in 'lavishing considerable sums among his troops to engage them in another battle'. But no one was willing to fight. Siraj-ud-daula asked his chief officers for advice. 'Some advised him to deliver himself up to the Colonel [Clive], against whom he could have no hope of success, having been twice defeated by him.' But to Siraj-ud-daula, surrounded by conspiracy, such advice could only be treasonable. About midnight, the news came that Mir Jafar had entered the city and Siraj-ud-daula 'put Lutf-en-nessa [Lutf-un-nisa] his consort, and a number of favourites into covered coaches and covered chairs, loaded them with as much gold and as many jewels as they could contain, and taking with him a number of elephants, with his best baggage and furniture, he quitted his palace about three in the morning and fled'.

Siraj-ud-daula hoped to meet the Frenchman, Law, who was coming to help him with a small force, but instead of taking the direct route to Rajmahal, the ex-Nawab decided to travel by the river. He and his party arrived opposite Rajmahal on 30 June, after a hard journey of seventy miles upstream. When they landed, Siraj-ud-daula and his women were so hungry that they made their way to the cell of a Muslim holy man named Dana Shah, and begged some food. He received them courteously and began to prepare a dish of rice cooked with butter and *dhal* and shredded onion.

Dana Shah thought Siraj-ud-daula was just another traveller in need of a meal, for he had 'disguised himself in mean attire'. Unfortunately the disguise was not complete and Dana Shah noticed that his guest was wearing 'very rich slippers'. Suspicious, he questioned the boatman, who told him the truth. 'This man [Dana Shah] whom he [Siraj-ud-daula] had either disobliged or oppressed in the days of his full power rejoiced at this fair opportunity of glutting his resentment and enjoyed his revenge.' A message was sent to Mir Kasim, the governor of Rajmahal (who was Mir Jafar's brother-in-law) while the holy man kept his guest occupied. Soon the governor arrived, accompanied by Mir Daud, and Siraj-ud-daula was taken prisoner and sent under a strong guard to Murshidabad.

Mir Kasim, who now had Lutf-un-nisa to himself, 'engaged her, partly by threats, and partly by promises, to disclose where was her casket of jewels; and this casket, the value of which could not be computed but by lacs, fell in his hands of course. Mir Daud, on this example, laid his hands upon the other ladies, and seized whatever he could come at; so that the people with them, on seeing how matters went, made haste to seize whatever was of their conveniency.'

An hour or so after Siraj-ud-daula had been taken away to the capital, Law arrived at Rajmahal. Fearing that the British might come in pursuit, the Frenchman hurriedly retreated and left the fallen Nawab to his fate. Law accepted the situation by assuring himself that Siraj-ud-daula 'would have been a burden to us [the French] rather than an advantage'. He was undoubtedly right.

Meanwhile, on 2 July, Siraj-ud-daula was being paraded through his capital like a dangerous criminal. 'He was in so wretched a condition, that the people of God, who saw him in that wretchedness, and remembered the delicacy, the glory, and the care and pomp in which he had been bred from his very infancy, forgot at once the ferocity of his temper, and the shameful actions of his life, and gave themselves up to every sentiment of pity and compassion, on beholding him pass by.' Mir Jafar and his friends, meeting secretly, decided that Siraj-ud-daula 'should immediately be put to death, lest the Colonel's clemency and moderation should plead for his preservation'. Mir Jafar therefore handed Siraj-ud-daula over to his son, Miran, 'recommending him earnestly in public to take the surest

methods to prevent his escape, but at all events to preserve his life'. According to Ghulam Husain, Miran was 'more expeditious and quick-minded in slaughtering people' than his father, Mir Jafar. He apparently had a knack for arranging murders, 'his system was that such sensations as pity and compassion answered no other purpose than that of spoiling business'. Miran immediately suggested to his friends that they should kill Siraj-ud-daula forthwith, but all except one, Muhammad Beg, 'rejected with indignation' this proposal.

The last act in the tragedy of Siraj-ud-daula was now to be played out. Muhammad Beg entered the ex-Nawab's prison.

> Siraj-ud-daula had no sooner cast his eyes upon that miscreant than he asked, whether he was not come to kill him? and the other having answered in the affirmative, the unfortunate Prince, on this confession, despaired of his life: he humbled himself before the Author of all mercies, asked pardon for his past conduct, and then turning to his murderer, 'They are not then' (broke he with a passionate tone of voice), 'they are not satisfied with my being ready to retire into some corner, there to end my days upon a pension': (here he paused a while; and, as if recollecting something, he added) 'No—they are not—and I must die—to atone for Husain Kuli Khan's murder'. He had no time to say more; for at these words the butcher smote him repeatedly with his sabre; and some strokes falling upon that beauteous face of his, so renowned all over Bengal for its regularity and sweetness, the Prince sunk on the ground: but with these words in his mouth: 'Enough—that is enough—I am done for—and the same Kuli Khan's death is revenged'. On uttering these words he fell on his face, returned his soul to its Maker, and emerged out of this valley of miseries, by wading through his own blood: his body was hacked to pieces, by strokes without number, and the mangled carcase being thrown across the back of an elephant, was carried throughout the most frequented parts of the city, by way of notifying the accession of the new sovereign: but what is singular, and yet is universally attested, the elephant driver having for some particular business of his own, stopped for a moment, it chanced to be precisely at Husain Kuli Khan's door, where some drops of blood were seen to drop from the mangled body, and they fell on the very spot where that nobleman had been murdered but two years before.

Siraj-ud-daula had reigned fifteen short months. He was, at his death, only twenty years old.

On 3 July, while Siraj-ud-daula's mangled remains were being

paraded through the city, 200 country boats loaded with treasure were floating down the river on their way to the waiting English in Calcutta.

Apart from the very substantial sums which Mir Jafar had agreed to pay the English East India Company for the losses brought about by the behaviour of his predecessor, the new Nawab had also promised that the army and navy would have ample return for their assistance in putting him on the throne. This the British felt he was quite well able to contribute, for Siraj-ud-daula's treasure was confidently believed to amount to about forty million pounds sterling at the then rate of exchange—a vast sum indeed. But everyone was to be disillusioned. Instead of the 5,000 *lakhs* of rupees everyone thought to be in the treasury, there turned out to be a mere 140. Nevertheless, it was agreed that half the sum promised to the British (i.e. 100 *lakhs*) would be paid immediately—two-thirds in cash and the remainder in jewels and plate—and the other half spread over three years, payable in equal annual instalments. This was done, and the convoy of boats carrying the half-payment made its way down the Hugli, supported by the navy 'drums beating and colours flying, and exhibited to the French and Dutch whose settlements they passed a scene far different from what they had beheld the year before, when the Nabob's fleet and army passed them, with the captive English and all the wealth and plunder of Calcutta'.

Everybody did very well out of Clive's success, not least Clive himself. His share amounted to £234,000, and members of Council gained from £50,000 to £80,000 each. The army and navy divided up £400,000. Not only did the British get their cut, but Rai Durlabh had already demanded (and received) five per cent of Siraj-ud-daula's treasure. Only Omichand, whom Clive told of the trick played upon him with the forged treaty, was to find his hopes unsatisfied.

For the British, the rewards were to be counted not only in cash. They were now indisputably the strongest power in Bengal. Mir Jafar was merely a puppet for Robert Clive. When, later, the new Nawab became restive under the hands of the puppet-master, he was simply and easily removed and another was put in his place. The British had destroyed French influence in Bengal and it now remained for them to dispose of the Dutch, who were foolish enough to challenge them. They were easily defeated in November 1759.

The importance of Plassey can be seen when the position of the British in Bengal in 1756 is compared with that of 1760. In 1756, the British were merely merchants, prosperous ones of course, but still only traders whose business lasted only as long as the Nawab permitted. The British would never have thought of dominion, of challenging the Nawab, if Siraj-ud-daula had not attacked Calcutta. In 1760 the situation was very different. The British were conquerors, the other Europeans humiliated and no longer a threat. Behind the front of the puppet Nawab, the British were extending their influence outward across India. When Madras was once again threatened by the French, it was the rich possession of Bengal that enabled the British to fight back and defeat them. Using Bengal as a base, the British slowly conquered the whole of India. Through a skirmish in the place of the palas trees, the British ceased to be merchants and became empire builders. Plassey was one of the most decisive battles in history, for, out of a combination of conspiracy and intrigue and the military genius of Robert Clive, the British set out upon that imperial journey which only now is coming to an end.

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